Rhetorical figures vs. euphemisms: motivation and evolution

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Resumen: Los eufemismos, generalmente definidos como figuras retóricas, tienen sus mecanismos particulares de creación y sus funciones bien definidas. Su motivación es causada por la necesidad de evitar un tabú lingüístico, mientras que las figuras retóricas son creadas con el propósito de la expresividad, del efecto estético o emocional. La metáfora (o cualquier metasemema) puede llegar a ser una de las formas de expresión del eufemismo, pero las dos figuras del habla no deben confundirse, ya que un eufemismo no es necesariamente expresivo. Hablando de las funciones del lenguaje involucradas en la construcción de ambas, notamos que las figuras retóricas son gobernadas por la función poética, mientras que en el eufemismo la función metalingüística es predominante. Es más, las evoluciones semánticas de ambas figuras tienen en común la pérdida de la expresividad (en el eufemismo, si la hay); sin embargo, una metáfora muerta no deja de ser una metáfora, mientras que el eufemismo se convierte en disfemismo o desaparece simplemente. Hemos notado que la expresividad del eufemismo actúa en su contra; los más estables son los eufemismos neutros, que se suelen crear a partir de préstamos ínter o intralingüísticos (diafásicos).

Palabras clave: *eufemismo, metáfora, figuras retóricas, degradación, lexicalización.*

Motivation of tropes and euphemisms

The study of euphemism has become increasingly appealing to linguists in the last few decades; nevertheless, most studies and papers consist of practical analyses of a certain corpus, such as samples of activist, political or military discourse. It appears that for some scholars the theoretical discussion on the topic of euphemism is already closed and the definition of euphemism as a rhetorical figure is taken for granted.

I cannot agree. About a decade ago I was arguing that euphemism is not to be seen as a rhetorical figure, and the difference resides in the mechanisms that produce them (Seiciuc, 2010: 25 *et seq.*). A rhetorical figure is created *with a purpose*, while a euphemism is used (or created) *for a reason*. The purpose of a rhetorical figure is purely aesthetic; it is *ars gratia artis*, it is neither necessary, nor compulsory. In euphemisms the aesthetic function –

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as strange as it may seem – is but a by-product, a disposable consequence of its "production process". I will explain my viewpoint: euphemisms are *necessary* words or phrases, since their mere existence is justified by the necessity to avoid certain words that are considered to be taboos. In the case of the euphemism we should focus on its causality, since it is the product of a social pressure, or, in linguistic terms, the result of the divergence between the referential function (the extralinguistic reality we refer to, as mirrored by human conscience) and the metalinguistic function (the choice of words we employ in order to convey a message about that reality). To put it another way, euphemism arises when we want to talk about a certain reality but are not allowed to refer to it by using a certain word, so we need to find a new one to replace the taboo. A euphemism is an effect of the pressure a certain historically constituted ethnolinguistic community puts on its speakers; such pressure comes from an explicit or an implicit cultural restriction and appears as a consequence of the interdiction of pronouncing a taboo word.

Given this special status of the euphemism (i. e. its origin), we need to make a clear distinction between an actual euphemism, resulting from a real interdiction, and what some abusively call "euphemisms", which are mere rhetorical figures relative to any reality that is perceived as a negative one. To this respect, euphemism itself is fundamentally different from the rhetorical figures, since, on the one hand, it is *necessary*, and, on the other hand, its stylistic value (when present) is an accidental consequence of the process of substitution. It is obvious, then, that euphemism should not be defined as a *rhetorical figure*; a more appropriate term would be the *figure of speech*, which does not imply any aesthetic intention, but highlights a discrepancy in the linguistic norm. This widespread confusion appears because the new signifier that substitutes the taboo signifier is very often an expressive word or periphrasis; i. e. euphemisms can have rhetorical figures as their form of expression. But a euphemism is not a *signifier*; it is *a complex process of cross-substitution of a taboo signifier by a new signifier, free of interdictions, based on essential or formal affinities, which reflects the coercive mentality of an ethnolinguistic community* (Seiciuc, 2010: 26-27).

Mechanisms of tropes and euphemisms

Euphemization is related to the logical level of the language, in which language is reconstructed by thought, that is, the level that allows dissociations and reorientations in the intimate structure of the linguistic sign. The mechanism of euphemism consists of the substitution of a signifier that is subject to linguistic interdiction, with a new signifier. This new signifier may be associated with an existing meaning or it can be an ad-hoc creation with the sole purpose of replacing the taboo signifier. In the second case, the matter is quite simple: it is the case of euphemisms (especially ironic ones) expressed by new linguistic signs, which associate the old signified with a signifier created on purpose, usually characterized by phonetic expressivity, that is, whose euphemistic value resides in the so-called *sound symbolism*, *rhythm*, *rhyme*, or *assonances*. This technique is characterized by simplicity, so its area is limited to the status of ironic or jocular euphemism, and we especially find them in children's language or in juvenile slangs, but sometimes they can become contextual or lexicalized dysphemisms.

In the first case, however, when the taboo signifier is replaced with an existing signifier, the latter penetrates into the structure of an existing linguistic sign, so various secondary relationships arise. Analyzing the facts, we notice that the substitution takes place at the level of speech acts; in language, a new connection is born between the first signified and the second signifier, little by little and in an artificial way, without the loss of the old connections. In fact, the second signifier is assigned the "role" of the first signifier,

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which is under interdiction, based on a formal attraction (phonetic compatibility of signifiers) or an essential one (defining features or common semes between the meanings, which implies a sort of formal or functional coherence among the referents, i. e. semantic compatibility between the two signified), that is to say that in any euphemism there is a certain degree of motivation. The second signifier becomes an expression of two different meanings that may (or may not) have several semantic constituents in common. Since both meanings are expressed by the same signifier, a paradigmatic relationship appears between them. We know that polysemantic signs consist in a signifier that relates to various signified; if one of these relations is the result of a process of euphemization, it often becomes the main one, putting aside the original relations, so the new signifier can eventually become a taboo. This is what happened to a number of metaphors that were historically used as euphemisms: they might be used with their original meaning in certain specific domains, but in everyday conversation the main meaning will be the taboo one.

Reassigning a new signifier to the taboo signified implies a selection based on a certain degree of compatibility, albeit semantic or formal; using a metaphor as the expression of a euphemism is a process of analogy, involving a transfer of meaning from one given context to another, so it is a form of internal borrowing (Burridge, 2012).

Evolution of metaphors and euphemisms

We need to point out that the poetic function is never a guarantee for the longevity of either euphemisms or tropes, but in the case of euphemisms it is usually responsible for its quick degradation. Euphemisms will always erode, according to the Allan-Burridge principle: *Bad connotations drive out good* (Allan & Burridge, 1991: 22 et seq.), and so will metaphors, but the two processes are not identical. While a dead metaphor is the result of a gradual loss of expressivity (Nöth, 1995: 131), a euphemism shifts to a different class of allophemism (Seiciuc, 2010: 31), i. e. it cannot perform its basic function any longer. A dead metaphor is still a metaphor, since we will always be able to analyze it from the viewpoint of its definition – an inexplicit simile – but euphemisms rarely "die" altogether, they rather tend to become dysphemisms.

The creation of a metaphor or of an expressive euphemism requires a certain degree of imagination and creativity; but it has to stay within certain limits, acceptable for daily conversation, otherwise they will not be lexicalized. Lakoff spoke of *one-shot metaphors* (Lakoff, 1987); one-shot euphemisms are equally possible, since the linguistic community is uncomfortable with any construct that is overly poetic, complicated or difficult to decode, so it rejects it. Only euphemisms with a low or average degree of expressivity have the chance to enter the common language.

Expressivity may be attractive at first, but what ensures the longevity of a metaphor is its convenience. A dead metaphor is a conventional metaphor (Pawelec, 2006: 120), a lexicalized instrument that is always at hand for the speakers to use, thus avoiding a creative or otherwise intellectual effort. This is not the case with euphemisms, or at least not for long, since they degrade rapidly. Oddly enough, the more expressive they are to begin with, the faster they lose their potential to function as euphemisms once they are lexicalized. If we take a look at any series of allophemisms, we will see that the most stable of all euphemisms are the neutral ones (orthophemisms, as Allan and Burridge call them). The lack of connotations is, possibly, the only guarantee for the stability of a euphemism; in other words: *no connotation is good connotation*. The safest way for the creation of a euphemism is to borrow it either from a foreign language or from scientific terminology. This way it does not come accompanied by connotations, so any negative connotations

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cannot easily "stick" to it. Using diaphasic synonyms, more precisely scientific terminology, is a traditional strategy which John Ayto called *blind-them-with-science* (Ayto, 1993). Any scientific discourse is supposedly neutral and unequivocal, and the propriety of the terms is compulsory; besides, using a scientific term, especially one of Latin or Greek origins, adds respectability to the discourse and it prevents, at least in part, any tendentious interpretations on the part of the listener. All these features help with the preservation of the original status of the euphemism.

There is another situation that we need to discuss about the difference in evolution between euphemisms and metaphors: the disappearance of the euphemistic function of a word due not to its own evolution, but to that of society. Ancient Western cultures had supplementary sets of taboos derived from their mystical or religious beliefs, which disappeared – completely or partially – after Christianization. Totemism and animism are the ancient beliefs that linked the human being directly to nature. The earliest totemic interdictions, inculcated and passed on from one generation to the next, lost their relation to the initial motivation and started to receive fanciful explanations, capable of satisfying the need of the human being to have a clear motivation for their actions. And as the life of the primitive societies was limited to a palpable and material world, the first "gods" appeared in the tangible objects around them. There were numerous interdictions to speak the name of certain animals (Frazer, 1911: 396-340; Ullmann, 1957:190; Blake, 2010: 192; Seiciuc, 2007: 324-326), and euphemisms were created at the time to replace such names. Obviously, the modern speakers are not aware of the fear their ancestors felt when speaking of the bear, the wolf, the bees or the weasel, since the corresponding taboos are long gone, so they cannot acknowledge the original motivation behind those names, neither can they perceive such words as *bear* as euphemisms; but evidence suggests such taboos are still alive in some European regions, or at least they were a century ago (Frazer, 1911: 396-398). Rawson calls these ancient forms *unconscious euphemisms* (Rawson, 1981: 2).

But modern languages are also full of unconscious metaphors, ancient metaphors that were created for one reason or another and that replaced, eventually, the initial word. Like the unconscious euphemisms, these metaphors are perceived as primary linguistic signs by the modern speakers, who cannot relate them to their original meaning; who would think, nowadays, that a *muscle* (or a *mussel)* is, in fact, a *little mouse*? Curiously enough, old metaphors that were used as jocular or funny euphemisms come back sometimes in modern languages as neutral euphemisms; such is the case of the Latin word *vagina*, whose original meaning was "sheath" of a sword or of some plants, an obvious (and not very creative) euphemism replacing the taboo word *cunnus*; nowadays, modern languages have borrowed it as a medical or anatomical term and it functions impeccably as a non-connotative, sterile euphemism.

Conclusions

As I have pointed out in the beginning of this study, the rhetorical figures and the euphemisms appear in different contexts, i. e. tropes are created with a purpose, and euphemisms – for a reason. Metaphors and other tropes can coincide with euphemisms on certain occasions, but we need to analyze their features at different levels: e. g. Latin verbs *copulo* and *coeo* are euphemisms because they replace the vulgar word *futuo*, but they are also tropes because they present the sexual act in a creative perspective: "having sex is binding/ tying together", and, respectively, "having sex is walking/ going together". The poetic function is secondary in euphemisms, much like the metalingual function is secondary in tropes, so there is also a difference at the pragmatic level.

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The evolution of the two types of figures has many things in common regarding the loss of the novelty and their lexicalization, but while metaphors will remain metaphors (even if the speakers fail to perceive them as such, due to their lexicalization), euphemisms lose precisely the traits they were created for, so they become something else, they become dysphemisms, or sometimes disappear.

The death of a metaphor does not imply the urgent necessity to replace it; but euphemisms are situated on an ever-moving treadmill, so the need to find replacements is permanent.

Tracing the semantic evolution of euphemisms, their change in functions and behavior and also their lifespan helps understand the evolution of human mentality, or, as Hugh Rawson put it, euphemisms are "outward and visible signs of our inward anxieties, conflicts, fears, and shames. They are like radioactive isotopes. By tracing them, it is possible to see what has been (and is) going on in our language, our minds, and our culture" (Rawson, 1981: 1).

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