PERSPECTIVES ON DEFINING EUPHEMISMS

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Abstract: This paper aims at analyzing how euphemism is explained in general linguistics. The problem of defining euphemisms was not systematically touched upon by the Romanian linguists and we believe it is necessary to classify such definitions from a social, rhetorical and pragmatic viewpoints. Most of the explanations were arrived at due to some partial studies that focused on euphemisms either as a figure of speech or as an element of slang.

Keywords: Euphemisms; Defining; positive politeness; negative politeness

It is well-known that human language, due to its existence, has one single purpose: to convey the human thoughts and feelings in the most appropriate way. The achievement of this goal is only possible through the use of all the possible means of human language, given the fact that these means or possibilities are infinite [Coşeriu 1966: 64]. The use of euphemisms is unquestionably a part of all these multiple possibilities.

As paradoxical as it may seem, but prohibitions had a strong influence of a different nature. Thus, taboo enabled the movement of thought, challenged to actions and designed different perspectives by "polishing" the human reason, discovering antiworlds and antibodies, creating antimetaphors etc. Taboo is not only a ban concerning certain actions or certain words, it does not only mean a metathesis, alothesis, tmesis, an anagram or an acronym, etc., but it also means "a whole range of formal rituals and beliefs, which contributed greatly to the creation of human language, music, art, and also to the creation of writing as an expression of pagan ritual of symbolic representations" [Маковский, 5]. In general, language functioning is based on the existence of certain antinomies, that is, it is provided by the dialectic between "plus" and "minus", "correct" and "incorrect", "pass" and "fail" and "compulsory" and " optional "etc. Every word of the language, as the Russian linguist outlines below, is presented as a dialectical combination of "yes" and "no": "yes" can occur only because of the existence of" no "and" no "is a necessary condition for the existence of 'yes'" [*ibid*]. What is important to note here is that language provides enough opportunities for combining prohibitions against lifting the ban.

This paper aims at describing one essential element of the antinomy which concerns the prohibition/non-prohibition relationship, and namely, the euphemism. I have chosen this topic for research because euphemisms are the most frequently applied verbal devices in current language use that tend to change together with the evolution of the society, mitigating, avoiding or camouflaging "those negative issues" within it.

However, euphemism is one of the linguistic devices used in communication, pursuing one single goal: to mitigate the impact a message can have on the receiver. Being "the product of a constraint" [Seiciuc 2008: 22], euphemistic expressions help the speaker to select the terms in accordance with addressee group, avoiding in such a way, all the taboos of this target group.

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Generally, although euphemisms differ from language to language and from one society to another, they must be conceived in terms of individual functional features, and namely, of the role they play in communicative acts. Undoubtedly, euphemisms should be characterized, first of all, by ambiguity, distance, politeness, manipulation, political correctness that would create premises for an insufficient understanding of a conflict, a motivated avoidance of the direct term, a camouflage of the harsh reality etc. In other words, euphemisms do not fully satisfy the needs of oral and written communication, such as precision, rationality, opportunity etc.

The fact that the content structure of a euphemism is a symbiosis of various aspects (political, social, cultural, ideological, ethnic, etc.) increases the possibility of issuing vulnerable and hard to verify ideas. There is nothing shocking in this statement, if we consider that there is "nothing more social than language, which is the strongest knot, if not the foundation of the society". Therefore, this important detail allows "the danger of *emotional* considerations instead of the *rational* ones" [Hasdeu, 1].

On the whole, though the phenomenon we are interested in has been known since ancient times, the term *euphemism* occurs quite late in specialized literature. Thus, in Italian, the form *eufemismo* is recorded (a fact certified by DELI, GE, GRADIT dictionaries); for the first time the term *euphemism* appears in English in Th. Blount's work *Glossographia* in 1656 [Burchfield 1985: 13] and in French, the term *euphémisme* is recorded in 1730 [TLF, PR].

The definitions of euphemisms are different because euphemistic expressions encompass all the social and linguistic aspects. If we want to have a better picture of the concept of euphemism, we have to consider it as an overall cultural phenomenon and not to limit ourselves only to the examination of language, because euphemisms are conditioned by language, society, the situation and the logic of the structure and of the use of euphemisms. As is seen, most definitions of euphemism tend to fall into one of the three basic approaches to this concept: the social, linguistic and pragmatic ones. The researcher Lavinia Seiciuc adds the fourth type of definition that refers to 'the relationship between language and thought" [Seiciuc, 24].

According to Dumarsais, euphemism is "a figure of speech which conceals unpleasant, bad or sad ideas under some names that are not typical of those ideas: they are a veil and have a seemingly more enjoyable, less shocking or honest expressions as required" [Charaudeau *et alii*, 241-242]. In more recent works, euphemisms are defined as "a word or phrase that is substituted in speech or writing by another word or phrase which means something unpleasant, ugly, offensive or obscene" [Constantinescu Dobridor, 137].

The definitions which examine euphemisms from a linguistic perspective do not consider the cultural and the extralinguistic factors, emphasizing instead their functioning as a process in language. Such definitions describe euphemisms from a semantic perspective: it is explained as "a word or phrase in speech or in writing that substitutes an unpleasant, offensive, indecent or obscene word or phrase, respecting the parallelism of meaning" (http://dexonline.ro/definition/euphemism) "a language element that substitutes in speech or in writing an unpleasant, vulgar, offensive word or phrase, respecting the parallelism of meaning" [NODEX, 2002]; "a word or a phrase which substitutes in speech or writing a word or a phrase that denotes something bad, offensive or obscene. [<fr. *euphemism*, cf gr. *eu* - well, *phemi* - talking]" [DN, 1986]). Chamizo Dominguez and Sanchez Benedito view

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euphemism as a transfer process or as a semantic shift: "a euphemism is nothing else than using a term with a figurative sense, that is, giving a term that has a lexicalized literal meaning a different one. Therefore, in linguistic terms, a euphemism is a change of the meaning of a term or an extension of the meaning of a term" [Domínguez *et alii*, 37].

From the above definitions it might be concluded that a euphemism functions as follows: X and Y where X = a substitute and Y = a substituted term. Thus, X is a word or phrase and Y is also a term, word or a phrase with certain characteristics such as: "unpleasant, offensive, obscene, indecent, offensive, vulgar, ugly, coarse, cruel". In linguistic terms, it is defined as "a lexical device consisting in the mitigation of ideas through substitution or periphrasis, in rhetoric, it is the figure of speech based on this device" [DSL, 2005].

Allan & Burrigde examine the term euphemism from a pragmatic point of view[1]. The researchers emphasize that euphemism is "a means of mitigating a potentially face-threatening act and dysphemism is a face-threatening act" [Allan *et alii*, 11]. As a consequence, euphemisms will have to deal with linguistic politeness, while dysphemisms will be referred to as impolite language. In such a way, the authors suggest two terms *dysphemistic euphemism* and *euphemistic dysphemism* which will later be covered in the classification chapter. The types of *positive politeness* and *negative politeness* were defined by P. Brown & S. Levinson. Thus, linguistic politeness means to maintain the delicate balance between two antagonistic human desires. E. Benveniste argues that euphemisms depend on the context; the researcher holds the idea that "the situation alone determines the euphemism"[2] [Benveniste, 310]. In a similar vein, R. Zafiu states from the same pragmatic viewpoint that "euphemism is concerned with both making the listener feel good and self-protecting the speaker" [Zafiu, 35].

L. Seiciuc added to those three approaches the fourth type of definitions "which considers the euphemism as a manifestation of thought in language, without ignoring the social and linguistic coordinates" [Seiciuc, 26]. Finally, the newest and the shortest definition of this kind is proposed by A. Horak "euphemism is a device which mitigates the negativity of a taboo entity" [Horak, 60]. Jean-Jacques Robrieux regards euphemism as "an important mitigation device; it is different from extenuation in that it essentially denotes shocking, rude or ridiculous elements of an idea" [Robrieux, 41]. Euphemisms might be ranked among the figures of speech and the figures of thought, thus raising the theory tropes. The *Dictionary of Linguistics* written by G. Mounineste offers a more precise definition of euphemism and of its role in rhetoric: "a euphemism is the mitigation of thought. A euphemism uses multiple devices beginning with litotes, hyperbole, through to periphrasis, allusion, metaplasmic figures etc. When a euphemism attempts to express the opposite meaning, only then we can speak of antiphrasis" [Mounin, 130]. In other words, although a euphemism has the function to substitute a word for another, it is not always seen as a fully "automatic" function device. Unlike metaphor, periphrasis or litotes, the euphemism does not only rely on its own techniques. Thus, euphemisms, using other means of expression to perform their roles, are based, in fact, on various types of devices, especially, on those from the immediate proximity.

[1] "A euphemism is used as an alternative to a dispreferred expression, in order to avoid possible loss of face: either one's own face or, through giving offence, that of the audience, or some third party" [Allan, 11].
[2] «il faut, pour apprécier un euphémisme, restituer autant que possible les conditions d'emploi dans le discours […]. La situation seule détermine l'euphémisme».

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A figure of thought is based on the speaker's relationship with his discourse and affects broader structures of the text and not only a single word, a phrase or a sentence, therefore, a euphemism is defined as "a manifestation of the processes of thought in language» [Seiciuc 24].

Our own definition of the term is the following: a euphemism is an indirect, figurative or mitigating word or phrase, which substitutes an inappropriate, obnoxious, obscene, vulgar or offensive term that might shock the listener, might cause disgust, embarrassment, fear or might lead to a social conflict, taking at the same time into account the parallelism of meaning both in written and oral forms.

It is noteworthy that the terms that we associate with the term euphemism and which derive from the cited above definitions are: avoidance, camouflage, adjustment, lies, concealment, mitigation, substitution, prohibition etc. In most studies, euphemisms, alongside with taboos, are included in the list of *vocabulary ban.* We believe that this word combination does not meet the requirements set for this term, especially, for a linguistic term (transparency, brevity, etc.). The terminological instability of this word combination is determined by the fact that there are "forbidden" and "allowed" words in a language[3].

In other words, a euphemism is a gate, a bridge between language and society which combats vulgar words, rudeness, obscenity etc. The purpose of a euphemistic substitution is "to avoid communication failures and conflicts and make the listener feel good" [Крысин, 391].

From many perspectives, the suggested definitions show that euphemisms are closely related to the functioning of language and to the social relationships that unite or separate individuals.

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[3]It is interesting to note that all the dictionary entries that register the term *language ban* (*vocabulary ban*) refer exclusively to *taboo* words and expressions, yet, euphemisms are not mentioned at all.

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Abbreviations

DELI − *Dizionario della lingua etimologico Italian Cortelazzo* M., P. Zolli, *Bologna:* Zanichelli, 1999.
DN − *Dicţionar de neologisme* (*http://www.webdex.ro/online/dictionar_de_neologisme/*)
DSL − *Dicţionar de Ştiinţe ale Limbii*
GE − *Guards etimologico* di *Tullio De Mauro's* Marco Mancini, *Mailand, Garza,* 2000.
GRADIT − *Grandedizionario italiano dell 'uso, Tullio* De Mauro, Turin, Utete, 1999.
NEDRL − *New Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language*
PR − *Nouveau Petit Robert: alphabétique et analogique Dictionnaire de la langue française,* Paul Robert, Paris, Le Robert, 2006.
TLF − *Le Trésor de la langue française: Dictionnaire de la langue du XIXe XXE et du siècle (1789-1960), Paul IMB, Bernard Quemada, Paris, Gallimard*, 1971-1994.

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