Conflictive Situations and Their Linguistic Expression. Euphemisms of War

Lavinia SEICIUC
"Ştefan cel Mare" University of Suceava
lavinia_seiciuc@yahoo.com

Abstract: Human life is an unexhausted source for the creation of linguistic forms whose expressivity appears to increase whenever such relations are on the negative side. Conflicts of all sorts populate the repertoire of any language, due probably to the way human emotions react to situations that imply suffering, fear and death, which are abundant in world history. Our paper analyzes the way the image of such conflictive statuses is attenuated or enhanced by their linguistic expression, in an attempt to decipher the euphemistic and dysphemistic mechanisms that describe them.
Keywords: *conflict, language of politics, political correctness, euphemism, dysphemism.*

0. **Euphemism and political correctness**. Articulate language constitutes the basis for any intellectual activity, such as thought or reflection, so the human psyche is easily manipulated by the linguistic expression of non-linguistic facts or objects. The creation of the politically correct language is based on this property of the reality-language-mind relation, and its purpose is either to attenuate the impact of a negative reality by renaming it with a softer, more ambiguous name, or to reprogram human mind to accept a different perception on that reality in a process called neuro-linguistic programming (NLP). Political correctness, rejected by some and applauded by others, was called "the euphemization of euphemisms" [Moya Hernández, 2001] or "a set of euphemisms with attitude" [Burridge, 1999].

Political correctness was created as a direct response to the changes in Western mentality following WWII. Certain types of perceptions or behaviors that were perfectly natural and acceptable prior to the war became the taboos of our modern society, as I pointed out in my book *Linguistic taboo and euphemism*; such taboos did not evolve naturally, they did not accompany human communities throughout their history, so we perceive and treat them in a different manner than we perceive and treat traditional taboos, such as sexual or religious taboos [Seiciuc, 2010: 97 *et seq.*]. That is why political correctness applies to new taboos, not to traditional ones, as it "aims not to disguise unpleasant reality, but to compel its audience to go beyond the simple content of the message and to challenge assumptions that some assume are inbuilt and immutable aspects of our language" [Burridge, 1999].

BDD-A28557 © 2018 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:47 UTC)

1. **New taboos in modern society**. Different cultures assign different degrees of "tabooism" to those new taboos. Racial issues are almost inexistent in Eastern Europe, for example, and so are gender issues in Western Europe. Each culture has its own way to relate to such issues, based on its history, more concretely on the political and social tensions between a majority and a minority.

Nevertheless, the root of all these taboos is the conflict between "us" and "them". Skin color, religious beliefs, language, etc., can and will isolate an individual or a minority group from the majority. Usually, the minority becomes the guilty party, the perpetrator of all evils, as René Girard pointed out in his magnificent *Scapegoat* [Girard, 1986].

Our modern Western society is plagued with all sorts of tensions and conflicts, their dimension varying from small groups to overseas nations, and modern tabooism is based mainly on the notion of exclusion [Merle, 1993: 8-10]. But, as I have already said, social tensions differ from one culture to another, while war appears to be the only common new taboo in the European Union and North America, i. e. it is approached – linguistically speaking – with the same caution.

2. **The language of politics**. War is the most complex form of conflict, as it involves human society at every possible level. Civil population is equally caught in its tragic consequences, and this is always a red flag in the creation of a discourse on such topic. Furthermore, war is the most important factor in an attempt to structure history, for the main events and changes are usually connected to a war or another [Moya Hernández, 2001]. The language of politics is meant to be a diplomatic discourse, but it is, in fact, a discourse of intended ambiguity, and the double standard of the language of politics forces us to read between the lines if we want to decipher the opacity of the messages [Soler-Espiauba, 2007: 998]. The political discourse is nowadays based on certain clichés – handy tools to be employed in order to save effort of thought, but also a common code with the audience. It is also based on a list of terms to avoid at all cost [Morató, 1997: 38]; the term *war* appears to be one of them, but only in certain situations, as I will show below.

3. **Euphemization of the concept of *war***. Some say history is written by the winners, and it makes sense, in a way. But nowadays the "losers" have the possibility to present their own version of the facts, and the two versions often collide. Each side presents their own reasons for the war in different terms, motivating their participation to the conflict with different arguments. While the arguments of the *defender* are almost invariable throughout history (*defending* land, culture, nation, religious beliefs), those of the *offender* or *invader* are never the same, since it is not easy to justify aggression before the eyes of the entire world. Their arguments are usually false pretenses, little white lies that are bound to soothe the conscience of both soldiers and civilians. As for third parties, nations that enter a conflict bound by a treaty, here is what British writer H. G. Wells says in relation to the participation of Great Britain in WWI: "We declared war because we were bound by treaty to declare war. […] We had no obligations and no interests there. […] No Power in the world would have respected our Flag or accepted our national word again if we had not fought" [Wells, 1914: 7].

Should we consider the offender's arguments throughout Western history, we will notice that they can draw an interesting and complex picture of the evolution of mentality. For the Romans, it was the necessity to civilize and unify the world, so that it would benefit from the superiority of Roman culture, civilization, law system, literature, science, etc. In their defense, we need to admit that they laid the foundations for the modern

BDD-A28557 © 2018 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:47 UTC)

Western culture, based on citizenship, variety and tolerance. It is also interesting to note that the Roman wars intended to pacify the Mediterranean area and brought the famous *Pax Romana* to their new territories. In theory, the *Pax Romana* began in the 1st century BC and ended in the 2nd or 3rd c. AD, but some scholars consider that we need to refer to the pacification of each province separately, so it would have began in Sicily in the 3rd c. BC [Eckstein, 2010: 574].

Later on, the medieval period brings new forms of validation for war. The *Crusades* were Holy Wars, fully justified and supported by the Church; the sixth Commandment was suspended if the victim was an "infidel", since invasion and killing served a greater purpose, that of liberating the Holy Land where Christ was buried. The term *crusade* itself is symptomatic for the nature of these military expeditions, as it is etymologically related to the Latin word *crux, crucis* ("cross").

The Iberian Peninsula *Reconquista* was also a holy war, where the defenders become the offenders in an eight-century conflict. The Christian army aimed to reconquer the land that once belonged to their ancestors and bring it back to the bosom of the Christian Church. The *Reconquista* was perceived as a glorious battle against religious infidelity, as depicted in epic poems such as *La Chanson de Roland* (written probably at the beginning of the 11th century) and *El cantar de mio Cid* (written probably at the beginning of the 12th century). The religious aspect of this prolonged war is obvious in the terms *Reinos Católicos* ("Catholic Kingdoms") and *Reyes Católicos* ("Catholic Kings"); so the conflict is not between nations, races or cultures, but between religions.

After the Middle Ages, controlled by the Church, we enter the Age of Discovery, opened by Spain and Portugal. In their historiography, the term *Descubrimiento* is preferred to *Conquista*, in an attempt to shift the focus away from the real facts. The missions of exploration for commercial purposes will soon degenerate into conquest and colonization of new territories. The Spanish and Portuguese expansionism is corroborated with the religious factor, and missionary work becomes a smokescreen hiding the real purposes of the expedition: the riches of the New World and the overnight profits brought by slave labor. Britain is soon to follow the trend in America, Africa and Asia, then the French or the Dutch began their overseas expansion, and little by little expansionism will become a perfectly natural trend, a privilege of the "superior" Europeans over the "savage nations" they occupied, a duty of the white man to bring the light of civilization to the whole world. In these circumstances, expansion wars do not require any explanation, justification, argument other than the ones stated above, so the keywords for this period were *civilization, pacification, exploration, discovery*, etc. Any attempt to freedom from the subdued nation is called *rebellion* or *uprising*, and it was perceived as an act of defiance or insubordination, an act of treason against the empire that gracefully "protected" them.

Well, the high peak of the expansionist trend is not in the 17th century, unless we refer to its geography; the imperialist wars culminated in Europe in the first half of the 20th century. Europe was, at the time, a mosaic of cultures and ethnicities controlled by a handful of powerful nations, who treated them like second-hand citizens (or worse!). The two World Wars began in Europe because of the ethnic tensions between the subdued nations and their oppressors. WWI was a new type of war due to the number of participant nations and to the dimensions of the destruction it caused to innocent lives. It was called *The Great War* afterwards, where the term *great* refers to its extent. Soon after it began, H. G. Wells called it *the war that will end war* in a collection of articles he wrote about the conflagration [Wells, 1914]. His phrase was a real success, perhaps for its apparent optimism; but Wells talks about it with certain fatalism: "And war is mortal conflict. We

BDD-A28557 © 2018 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:47 UTC)

have now either to destroy or be destroyed. We have not sought this reckoning, we have done our utmost to avoid it; but now that it has been forced upon us it is imperative that it should be a thorough reckoning. This is a war that touches every man and every home in each of the combatant countries. It is a war […] not of soldiers but of whole peoples" [Wells, 1914: 8].

After the Great War That Should Have Ended War, the second world conflagration reached peaks of atrocity and destruction that go beyond human imagination. In a Europe that was still under the impact of WWI, Germany needed strong arguments for the second invasion, and they were provided by the theories concerning the superiority of the Arian race. The German nation (or at least some part of it) was seduced by the ideas of the superior German man, the *Übermensch*, as Nietzsche called it, an ideal representative of the Arian race that would be created through careful selection and eugenics; to this purpose, Germany pretended to have the right to eliminate "inferior" nations, bound to a slave mentality, and to occupy their territory, as they needed more vital space, *Lebensraum*, to develop properly. Racism, and especially anti-Semitism, was common in Europe at the time; still, some euphemisms were coined in Germany such as *Judenfrage* ("the Jewish question") or *Endlösung* ("the final solution"). For the Nazi propaganda, their war was perfectly justified by natural rights and its purpose was to recreate German greatness in a Third Empire.

Mentality in the Western world changed dramatically after WWII: the notion of war itself had to be reevaluated. In the late '30s, right-wing Spanish leader José Antonio Primo de Rivera would make such statements as: "War is inalienable to man. […] It is an element of progress. It is absolutely necessary! […] Men need war. If you think it's evil, that's because they need evil" [Trigo, 1936]. Such assertions would be unacceptable in the political discourse after WWII – even though history proves him right. The political discourse on war has become more prudent, vaguer, and more ambiguous. And there is another reason for the change of tone and focus in that discourse: the Western society did not get through yet another war "at home". The overseas wars (Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, etc.) are presented as noble missions to defend civil rights, democracy and liberty. In the '50s and '60s it is not unusual for military operations to receive explicit names, sometimes aggressive: *Operation Killer, Operation Ripper, Operation Masher*. Such tendency will change over the years, so the codenames for the operations from the years 2000 on will be milder or vaguer. We notice that's sometimes they receive euphemistic names, such as: *Operation Glory* (Korea), *Operation Passage to Freedom* and *Operation Freedom Deal* (Vietnam), *Operation Enduring Freedom* and *Operation Freedom's Sentinel* (Afghanistan), *Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Iraq); *freedom* appears to be the keyword for describing the American and allies' invasions and military operations overseas.

4. **Conclusions**. As we have seen, the concept of war underwent several mutations throughout Western history, as it was perceived (better yet: presented) as a means to achieve cultural glory, as a religious duty, as a natural right, as a necessity leading to progress, as a scientific endeavor, as a form of protection of the weak. It is not the time, nor the place, to speculate on the real reasons behind military conflicts, which are usually related to power or riches, for we are only concerned with the linguistic means that politicians employ in order to create an aura of dignity, glory and heroism around the misery of war. Credible and convincing arguments are presented to the public, and they translate, at a linguistic level, into euphemisms that screen and filter reality, transforming it into something if not desirable, at least acceptable.

BDD-A28557 © 2018 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:47 UTC)

REFERENCES

Burridge, Kate, 1999. *Is political correctness a euphemism for euphemism?*, radio broadcast on "Lingua Franca", Saturday, 20th of March, 1999, transcript available online on http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/archived/linguafranca/.

Del Rey Morató, Javier, 1997. *Los juegos de los políticos: teoría general de la información y comunicación política,* Madrid, Tecnos.

Eckstein, Arthur M., 2010. "Conceptualizing Roman Imperial Expansion under the Republic: An Introduction", in Nathan Rosenstein and Robert Morstein-Marx (eds.), *A Companion to the Roman Republic*, Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell.

Girard, René, 1986. *The Scapegoat*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Merle, Pierre, 1993. *Lexique du français tabou*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil.

Moya Hernández, Germán, 2001. "El lenguaje militar. Tabú, eufemismo y disfemismo" en *Revista Electrónica de Estudios Filológicos*, March 1st, Tonos Digital.

Seiciuc, Lavinia, 2010. *Tabú lingüístico y eufemismo*, Suceava, Editura Universităţii.

Soler-Espiauba Conesa, Dolores, 2007. "El habla de los políticos: del eufemismo al insulto, pasando por el (buen o mal) talante", in Enrique Balmaseda Maestu (coord.), *Las destrezas orales en la enseñanza del español L2-LE: XVII Congreso Internacional de la Asociación del Español como lengua extranjera (ASELE)*, Logroño, 27th-30th of September 2006, tome 2, 2007, pp. 997-1014.

Trigo, Luisa, 1936. "El voto de la mujer", in *La Voz de Madrid*, February 14th.

Wells, H.G., 1914. *The War That Will End War*, London, Frank & Cecil Palmer.

BDD-A28557 © 2018 Editura Universităţii din Suceava
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:47 UTC)