NEW PERSPECTIVES ON OLD TABOOS. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS WHILE USING EUPHEMISMS

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Abstract: Social Media and its content creators are developing nowadays many ways in order to avoid the social taboos. Since most of the daily human interactions have been lately transitioned from face to face contexts into the digital area, approaching sensitive topics became even easier to address while hiding beneath communication strategies, marketing campaigns or products and services specially designed to tackle them. This is a challenge that oftentimes is being passed by the public figures which are expressing out loud encouraging views around taboos and stigmas manifested in a certain social and cultural context. The purpose of this paper is to underline that the euphemism as a rhetoric figure can be perceived as a crucial instrument in order to mitigate unpleasant conversations, to reduce embarrassment around uncomfortable discussions such as breastfeeding, menstruation and sexuality.

Keywords: Euphemism, Emoji, Content Creators, Social Media, Social Taboos

1. Tackling Social Taboos

Now that the communication tendencies have changed so much, especially because of the different values and principles promoted by individuals, Advertising and Social Media can count on new and different communication channels, which have almost totally replaced face to face interaction. However, the biggest challenge is related to the latest ways of approaching sensitive topics, such as describing feelings, or highlighting unpleasant situations. Depending on how difficult or sensitive has been a topic perceived by the communicators, the approaches can vary. Even if there are multiple determinants in terms of conversation typologies, once a sensitive subject of discussion has been touched, then the need that comes in is strongly related to the selection of those suitable words which can best describe a feeling or a sensation. In this context, we will be directly naming these delicate topics as *social taboos*.

The place that has been worldwide occupied by taboos for such a long time in civilization is being analyzed from different perspectives but, in this paper, the interest will be directed to the sociolinguistic area. It is therefore appropriate to bring up meanings, such as *interdiction*, *prohibition* or *sacred*, which have been introduced in the definitions that were found for the social taboos. Starting with Jevons[1], according to whom the taboos have been characterized as being dangerous and infectious. Later, Freud considered that the taboos should be perceived as prohibited actions, for which there is a certain propensity in the individual's unconscious[2]. Social taboos have achieved over time multiple uses, one them

[1] Frank Byron Jevons, *Introduction to the History of Religion*, London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1896, p. 61.
[2] Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, Translated by Abraham A. Brill, Moffat Yard and Company, New York, 1919, p. 54.

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being that draws attention, forcing the individuals to consider their unpleasant connotations[3]. It arises naturally to pay more attention to the negative issues, but when trying to classify the taboos depending on their degree on the negative scale, there can be underlined that not all the taboos can be perceived from the same perspective, some being harder to tackle than others.

Moreover, there are people who have considered that avoiding linguistic taboos represents a symbol of their civilization. For example, the American people, but also the British people, have shown themselves by refusing to approach certain topics, but especially, they have avoided the language to refer to prohibited objects or actions. One of the reasons why avoiding the use of language for the expression of taboos is a solution is closely related to Aristotle's remarks, regarding the relation between sound and meaning. Following the same idea, it can be considered that these are affections of the soul[4], a series of contents of consciousness. Therefore, while performing a more in-depth literature analysis, it can be underlined that the social taboos can be divided in two major categories, the *implicit* and the *explicit* expressions. The *implicit expressions* are related to everything considered sacred or impure, and according to Goffman, we can highlight three stigmatization categories[5]. The first one is about having a bad physical appearance such as malformations or scars. Another stigma is represented by the psychic deviation and the third one would be the tribal stigma, which is related to gender, race, ethnicity or sexual orientation. With regards to the second type of taboos, these are self-explanatory, the *explicit expressions* being dynamic and different from a culture to another. There are terms which become outmoded because of the politics and not only. People are always trying to find new words for the emotionally charged referents, but after a while, these euphemisms become tainted by association, and then there comes the need to discover a new word which will acquire new connotations and so on.

Returning to Freud and his theory about the social taboos, he emphasizes in one of his papers[6] that, in general, people have an ambivalent attitude towards what a taboo may represent. On one hand, as previously mentioned, the taboo refers to prohibition and renunciation, but on the other hand, there can be found in the unconscious that pleasure of the individual to try breaking this type of interdictions.

2. Concealing the reality. Euphemism as a tool

The appearance of the first taboos also favored the effective uses of euphemism, but it is not yet in the period when it can be said that it enjoys the same theorizing, as other rhetoric figures. The euphemism is a complex phenomenon, and any perspective on it cannot be ignored, because only in this way an overall image can be constructed, through an interdisciplinary approach, characterized by simultaneity. Because people consider more important the things that they say to each other than the things that they only think about, the thought process has thus been determined to function according to the way language is being used[7].

From a linguistic perspective, euphemism's definition starts from the contrast between connotation and denotation, as Bruneau perceives it as a replacement of a prohibited term with another term that belongs to another category[8]. According to the approaches to euphemism from a rhetorical perspective, it is treated antithetically with the hyperbola, the

[3] Steven Pinker, *The stuff of thought: Language as a window into human nature*, Penguin, New York, 2007, p. 328.
[4] Lavinia Seiciuc, *Tabuul lingvistic și alofemismele*, Editura „Universității Ștefan cel Mare”, Suceava, 2011, p. 30.
[5] Erving Goffman, *Stigma*, Penguin, Londra, 1963, p. 13.
[6] Sigmund Freud, *op.cit.*
[7] Eliecer Crespo Fernández, *El eufemismo, el disfemismo y los procesos mixtos: la manipulación del referente en el lenguaje literario inglés desde mediados del siglo XIX hasta la actualidad*, Universidad de Alicante, 2005.
[8] *Ibidem.*

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realities to which the discourse of these referential figures refers are contrasting, the euphemism referring to a diminished reality in relation to what really exists[9]. Another type of definition for the euphemism is the one that perceives the thought processes and their manifestation in the language, as taking the form of euphemistic expressions. It can be said, therefore, that "the euphemism is a figure of thought which consists in attenuating, by substitution or periphery, a brutal, insulting or trivial expression (thus avoiding one's own term)"[10]. According to Allan and Burridge, the euphemism appears as an alternative for an inappropriate expression, aiming to diminish the sense of embarrassment of the communicators, but also of all the persons involved in the linguistic act.

Starting from the classification of taboos, due to their increasing number from one day to another, the downgrade process of the euphemisms is more alert shortly after their emergence. The euphemisms belonging to this type of language fulfil certain social functions, which fall under the umbrella of the general purpose, identified by Chamizo and Sánchez[11], that of being able to name an unpleasant object or its unpleasant effects. Taboo situations can be avoided through social functions that will be detailed later in this paper. The first function is to dignify, and through this function, a favorable image is created for the reality that has been perceived in a negative way. Hence, an image with a dignified character will be created for certain disadvantaged social categories, in which we can include the ethnic, religious or the professional ones. This way, we highlight the fear of the speakers that they will be accused of discrimination and a low degree of tolerance, and the euphemistic expressions do nothing more than to restore a bad reputation of some disadvantaged social groups, which, over time, have suffered physical or even linguistics abuses.

The second function which characterizes the euphemistic expressions is the mitigation one. By means of this function, the impact of a message's content which "evokes unpleasant realities or even painful" is being diminished[12]. The mitigation role contributes to avoiding but also replacing harsh and brutal expressions through ambiguous expressions. This kind of language can be perceived as a compassion mark which, in the same time, can be utilized when designing image strategies for certain institutions or even individuals.

Additionally, the last function of the euphemisms is the reverential one. The reverence can be expressed through various processes, one of them being the usage of the politeness pronouns, but also by means of "selecting some words to the detriment of others, considered inappropriate or insufficiently respectful"[13]. At the same time, following a certain protocol is mandatory, this function being related to the attention that is being paid on looking after the well-being of the interpersonal relations in the society.

3. Icons and euphemisms

Based on taboos' typology, they can thus be analyzed from two points of view: the traditional and the contemporary mindset. Our goal is to sketch the portrait of certain taboos in advertising, especially since the purpose of advertising is to create consumer needs, thus shaping the community life. For this paper, advertising becomes a documentation source, which contributes to the "socio-cultural radiography of the taboo"[14], regardless of its typology or its forms.

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[9] Constantin Sălăvăstru, *Mic tratat de oratorie*, Editura Universității „Alexandru Ioan Cuza", Iași, 2010, pp. 340-341.
[10] Val Panaitescu (coord.), *Terminologie poetică și retorică*, Editura Universității „Alexandru Ioan Cuza", Iași, 1994, p. 60.
[11] Pedro J. Chamizo Domínguez, Francisco Sánchez Benedito, *Lo que nunca se aprendió en clase: eufemismos y disfemismos en el lenguaje erótico ingles*, Comares, Granada, 2000, pp. 37-38.
[12] Lavinia Seiciuc, *op.cit.*, 30.
[13] *Ibidem*, p. 43.
[14] Oliviu Felecan, *Un excurs onomastic în spaţiul public românesc actual*, Editura Argonaut, Cluj-Napoca, 2013, p. 12.

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According to Chamizo Domínguez[15], for a word or an expression to become a euphemism, it must meet three conditions: it must substitute a taboo term, it must be characterized by ambiguity, and the taboo term substitution with any other term must be impossible to be performed. Thus, this subchapter will focus on socio-cultural and linguistic taboos, from the form they take in the advertising products design viewpoint, but also from the standpoint of the intensity and the effects of using euphemisms. Moreover, the purpose of this paper is to describe another way of constructing the advertising speech, by also identifying other forms in which the euphemism can manifest itself, others than the linguistic matters we are already used to.

And, if until now, we referred to the euphemism only at a linguistic level, we mention that it is not only found at language styles level, because, if we are to consider that the oral variants of the language styles are supported by the visual codes most of the time, we will eventually come to discuss about a syncretic relationship between the two mentioned codes. Also, not only the oral variants can be accompanied by images, but also the written ones, being accompanied by images that complement the transmitted information[16]. As regards the icon, we will not turn our attention to that particular thing that replaces something else and that refers to the latter only due to some similarity, but we will consider a double approach, a deductive one of the icon and one of the image's inductive construction[17]. The connection between the euphemism and the icon can be characterized starting from those aspects that determined the birth of the euphemism, more precisely, from the emergence of the first taboos[18], and this connection is called iconic euphemism.

If we refer to the hyperbole and its role in the advertising industry, the iconic euphemism also plays a role to that effect, namely in replacing taboo elements, which means that it reduces the effect that the latter might have had on the relevant audiences, avoiding the creation of repulsion and disgust feelings reflected on the consumers faces. For this paper, the first example to be highlighted is related to the commercial for the sanitary pads from *Always*[19]. Normally, a pad is being used to absorb the menstrual fluid, which is kept away from the skin and it gives a more comfortable sensation when women are confronting their period. Since there is this need for hygiene, *Always* has been careful with the manner in which certain societal taboos are being exposed. Analyzing this image, it can be observed that the liquid to be absorbed is blue, which symbolizes the color of purity. In this case, because it replaces the color of the blood (menstrual fluid), the presence of the iconic euphemism can be highlighted, as its use is helping on avoiding the embarrassment sensation or disgust.

The iconic euphemism can be also identified in many other commercials for hygiene, well-being, cleaning products, but also in all the ads that are approaching sensitive topics which might need different a special attention when releasing the message campaign. Another type of the iconic euphemism might be represented as animations, aiming to avoid the exposure of some of the most disgusting images, such as bacteria and fungi. Continuing along the lines provided by the icon, another way in which the euphemisms can be used is closely related to the *emojis*, those icons that use alphanumeric characters, the cartoon-like images. The emojis can be embedded in a text conversation, but also the act of sending a

[15] Pedro J. Chamizo Domínguez, Francisco Sánchez Benedito, *op.cit.*

[16] Gareth Jones, Jennifer George, *Essentials of Contemporary Management*, McGraw Hill Irwin, New York, 2008, p. 211.

[17] Aurel Codoban, *Repere și prefigurări*. Editura Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1982, pp. 178-179.

[18] May Derwent, *Euphemism and The Media*, in *Fair of Speech. The Uses of Euphemism* coordinated by D. J. Enright, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1985, pp. 122-134.

[19] Advertisement can be watched here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bCpHJpefQU, last visited in February 2020.

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string of emojis[20] can serve as an entire conversation. For all these modern ways of expressing emotions, we can highlight connections with the use of the euphemism, based on its functions.

Thus, if in a certain context we are referring to certain taboos of the impure, death, illness or other undesirable aspects of life, the issuer's intent is to choose an emoji instead of an ordinary written message, this communicator's option could possibly lead to the connection between euphemism and emojis. The predilection for using an emoji to the detriment of an euphemistic role text can be analyzed from the message intensity point of view, obviously depending on the speaker's intent. Nowadays, the emojis are not being used only by people in their interpersonal interactions, but brands are also using emojis to communicate with their target audience, to infiltrate their mobile phones, to demonstrate that they are on top of the latest communication trends, and also to convey messages in elegantly simple ways.

5. Case Study 1: The condom emoji

As Marcel Danesi highlighted, emojis popularity can be considered probably "a consequence of the growing practice of using emoji in marketing, branding, in political campaigns, pop culture, and so on"[21]. Nowadays, emojis have become so popular and have acquired so many roles, but this paper's interest is strongly related to social expression. Using this as the starting point, it is important to be mentioned that emojis are now reflecting "racial and ethnic features"[22], although at the very beginning, the yellow faces goal was to avoid putting a certain color on the faces, as a mitigation strategy, in respect with discrimination and its repercussions. As individuals, Weizenbaum thinks that what makes us feel human is the connection between mind and body, "the experiences that shape our memory and our thinking"[23], but also our needs to spread emotions and nurture feelings. Through the way they have been designed, emojis can express emotions and not only.

The largest and the most popular producer of condoms and accessories, with 90 years of presence on the market, Durex has designed a campaign in 2016 which has involved emoji's usage. Based on a research that Durex has performed, 84% of the young people (18 to 25 years old) have expressed their opinion, according to which it would be much easier to talk about sex by using emojis than text. Furthermore, safe sex represented the main goal of the campaign, by avoiding the sexually transmitted diseases such as chlamydia, gonorrhea, or HIV, but also by encouraging people to practice safe sex. In order to mark World AIDs Day on December 1, Durex has been suggesting to people to use and share the hashtag *#CondomEmoji*[24] in asking for the support of safe sex. In 2016, Durex has drafted a letter for the Unicode Consortium proposing to them the introduction of a *condom emoji*. The initiative has been supported by organizations dedicated to a healthy lifestyle. The letter[25] itself has been designed in a similar manner on how the young generation is communicating on Social Media platforms. Through the insertion of emojis in the official letter, Durex intended to

[20] Corey Seemiller, Meghan Grace, *Generation Z: A Century in the Making*, Routledge, United States of America, 2019.

[21] Marcel Danesi, *The Semiotics of Emoji: The Rise of Visual Language in the Age of the Internet*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2016, p. 95.

[22] *Ibidem*, p. 95.

[23] Nicholas Carr, *Superficialii. Efectele Internetului asupra creierului uman*, Editura Publica, București, translated in Romanian by Dan Crăciun from the original *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*, 2010, p. 126.

[24] https://www.prnewswire.co.uk/news-releases/durex-launches-campaign-to-create-the-first-official-safe-sex-emoji-551328591.html (last visited in February 2020).

[25] The main video of the campaign can be watched here: https://www.ubergizmo.com/2016/05/durex-unicode-consortium-condom-emoji/ (last visited in February 2020).

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show to Unicode how serious their proposal is, making the effort to communicate on Unicode's language.

Moreover, Durex expressed their concern in regards with how the young people connect with each other and how often the emojis are being used in their daily communication. Durex highlighted that a condom emoji will enable young people to overcome embarrassment around the discussion of safe sex, it will encourage conversations and raise awareness of the importance of using condoms in protecting against sexually transmitted infections. Durex mentioned that emojis are a crucial part of how young couples connect and the research they have performed suggests that the creation of an official sex emojis is vital to inserting messages around protection into their sexual conversations. Unfortunately, the condom emoji has been rejected multiple times, but Durex proposed for the sexual conversations an unofficial international condom emoji, which is showing an open umbrella with raindrops. The hope for when using this emoji is that it will empower the young generations to feel comfortable when discussing about sex, easing the access in the same time to the conversations around this topic.

In 2019, Durex wanted to break another stigma through a new campaign[26] that has been successfully implemented this time: @RED. While planning to celebrate the International Women's Day through the @RED campaign, the women in South Africa were encouraged to start talking about sex. By having conversations about sex might save lives, taking into consideration that in South Africa around 7.2 million people[27] are living with HIV or AIDS. Many influencers around the world have been involved in this campaign so girls in South Africa can stay in school and to enjoy a healthy life, without being exposed to AIDS. RED campaign's purpose was to reduce pregnancies among young women and help them to access the reproductive services they need. The message that circulated in Social Media and not only was asking people "to give a f**k" about HIV, the consumers being encouraged to buy Durex red or to join online conversations by using #GAF[28] and explicit emojis.

On the level of the messages that have been spread by Durex through emojis and hashtags, it is important to mention that not only the brand's popularity is increasing, but mentalities are also changing. Furthermore, stigmas and taboos are being approached through messages that are usually targeting large publics and various stakeholders and this could be the proper strategy for both parties: the brand itself and its consumers, by means of tangible and intangible resources. Our interest is on the intangible effects induced by these campaigns, which can bring on the table sensible topics but to be tackled as normal as possible.

6. Case Study 2: The period emoji

In 2017, UK Plan and Plan International Australia, two humanitarian organizations which are focusing on child protection, education, health, and sexual rights, have implemented a campaign willing to raise the flag on destroying stigmas around menstruation, aiming to break the silence and shame around periods. With the aim of the girls to have the opportunity to explain the feelings of cramps, uncontrollable emotions and comfort eating, the main goal when launching the campaign was to introduce a *period* emoji[29]. The idea came with the occasion of the Menstrual Hygiene Day which is celebrated in May. Creating this kind of emoji has been first a creative way to draw people's attention on such a sensitive topic. A survey has been carried in house, which underlined that most of the women aged 18-

[26] The main video of the campaign can be watched here: https://twitter.com/durex/status/1104030153112543233?s=20 (last visited in February 2020).

[27] Details about the RED campaign can be found here: https://www.red.org/durex (last visited in February 2020).

[28] Hashtag #GAF meaning *give a f**k*, key message in the RED Durex campaign.

[29] Details about the period emoji campaign can be found here: https://plan-uk.org/file/plan-uk-break-the-barriers-report-032018pdf/download?token=Fs-HYP3v, last visited in February 2020.

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34 believed that a period emoji would make the conversations around menstruation more approachable, being easier to bring this discussion on the table. Various emojis have been created by the Plan designers which were put to public vote. The winning emoji had to be presented to Unicode Consortium, for consideration to be included in the 2018 global emoji keyboard. Sadly, the design has not been accepted and the humanitarian organizations have been advised by Unicode Consortium to design an emoji which is to be used in many other contexts, than to be inserted only in discussions around menstruation. A new proposal has been submitted then for a blood drop emoji and it has been approved by Unicode. As there were 55,000 registered votes for the five proposed emojis, UK Plan and Plan International Australia figured out that their message resonated across their targeted group.

By means of this kind of emoji marketing campaigns, girls around the globe have been encouraged to accept failure as a tool which brings confidence and helps increasing self-esteem. Behaviours doesn't have to change after a menstrual leak, especially giving up on different type of activities, such as swimming or running, or maybe avoiding lighter shades when deciding what to wear. By having a stain on clothes caused by the menstrual leaking can be traumatising for the young girls, especially when receiving negative reactions coming from boys. All the pressure around the women body can now be diminished through this kind of campaigns. All the barriers, concerns and negative feelings can now be reduced by helping young generations to embrace normality and to start perceiving their periods not as a challenge or as an issue.

7. How does Social Media and its content creators impact the euphemism's use?

People are paying attention to what they say in a greater proportion than what they think, so the thought process is determined to work according to how the language is being used. In this way, from the fear of being considered intolerant and discriminatory, individuals often prefer to avoid certain words or expressions that may affect those they address. One of the euphemism's functions intervenes, having the role of creating a favorable image to the reality that has been perceived in a negative way. However, not only the intention of being considered non-discriminatory appears in the foreground, but also the need to diminish the reality and offer it a new packaging, which hides certain aspects, in order avoid hurting the interlocutor. In fact, it does not take the recipient's feelings to such an extent, as much as the desire of the one who uses the language characterized by political correctness to preserve appearances and not to enter into a conflict that can tarnish his image or disadvantage him, or making the individual seem unpleasant.

There is a pressure that it is said to have invaded every corner of the individual's life, making him so vulnerable that he gave up acting by himself, the only concern being the need of self-fulfillment. According to Ovidiu Hurduzeu, the individual liked to escape from the autonomy and freedom of expression, but this kind of loss has been perceived as a relief. That is how it started for people to look for certain techniques and technicians who promised to transform the unpredictable into quantifiable elements[30]. The whole life must be lived according to the right norms, under specialists' guidance. Thus, the uninitiated individual becomes vulnerable by attracting conformity and by joining certain groups that are functioning according to the principles that have been set by the political correctness phenomenon. By putting away any trace of initiative and creativity, people will use the same standardized behavior on any level, and this type of behavior has influenced the use of new and new euphemisms.

Therefore, this paper's goal is to highlight the role that the content creators, marketing campaigns and endorsers are playing especially when they are becoming a brand voice. There

[30] Ovidiu Hurduzeu, *Sclavii fericiți, Lumea văzută din Silicon Valley,* Editura Timpul, Iași, 2005, p. 8.

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is an industry[31] that nowadays it's worth that much, as the big brands have started to need this group of people which are using Social Media and providing such a huge amount of details regarding the products they are using or testing. Afterwards, the content creators are sharing via vlogs or posts through Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and so on their opinions on the product. What is extremely interesting in this industry is that these group is integrating the products they promote into their lives and the audience is mostly attracted to the experiences they are narrating, and nonetheless earning more credibility.

Conclusions

The most important lesson to be thought from the above is that the euphemism plays an important role as it helps on reducing the impact on different stigmas circulating around the world. The iconic euphemism is being used when in need for substitute the implicit taboos, previously detailed. For this paper, the advertising has become a documentation source, in order to establish a clear picture of what a social-cultural taboo is. The iconic euphemism through emojis can serve as an effective marketing tool for different kind of products, like hygiene products, medicines, cleaning products and so on. Their role might oscillate between the negative idea of concealing the reality and what marketers need to make their products more approachable.

The two study cases that have been brought to the reader's attention are not the only ones highlighting the connection between *emoji marketing* and *euphemisms*. There is also room to discuss about *breastfeeding* emoji, *skin color* emojis, and the *reproductive* functions. Starting from the examples I have presented, emoji marketing campaigns can help on approaching taboo topics and find ways to speak about the unspeakable, to refer to delicate issues. Taking into consideration that the euphemism appears in a conversation when selecting some words to the detriment of others, we can also conclude that using an emoji instead of text only will acquire euphemistic effect, based on the euphemism's roles and functions. However, the purposes of the campaigns that have been presented throughout this paper can also enjoy special attention, due to the fact that these are strongly related to developing a victim support system and overturning taboos that exist in society. To put it in other way, people's awareness should be improved when tackling societal taboos and here it comes the role that ethics is playing when approaching sensitive topics.

For further considerations on the usage of the euphemism, people have questioning if the euphemism can spread positive effects in the society. Therefore, when referring to breaking stigmas and taboos that have lasted over time, there can't be any doubt regarding the positive implications of the euphemism in the society.

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