Dysphemism

SHIELD AND WEAPON

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Oxford University Press

Oxford New York Toronto
Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi
Petaling Jaya Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo
Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town
Melbourne Auckland

and associated companies in
Berlin Ibadan

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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
200 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Allan, Keith, 1943–
Euphemism and dysphemism : language used as shield and weapon /
by Keith Allan, Kate Burridge.
p. cm. Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-19-506622-7
1. English language—Euphemism. 2. Dutch language—To 1500—Euphemism.
3. English language—Grammar, Comparative—Dutch.
4. Dutch language—Grammar, Comparative—English.
5. Euphemism. I. Burridge, Kate. II. Title.
PE1585.A37 1991 427'.09—dc20
90-49602

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

Euphemism and Dysphemism

Euphemism &

LANGUAGE USED AS

New York · Oxford · OXFORD

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To those whom we love

Preface

The form of language a person uses can cause offense to other human beings and to gods—even to dangerous animals. The result of misusing language can be dire: according to Leviticus (24:16) God told Moses 'He that blasphemeth the name of the LORD shall be put to death.' To shield a speaker from the consequences of giving offence, all languages have euphemisms. Euphemistic expressions trade on illusion: the bluntly profane (and therefore in some eyes blasphemous) 'Jesus Christ!' is euphemistically transmuted into 'Jeepers Creepers!' but the same person is referred to by both, and if the former is profane, even blasphemous, so should the latter be, too. Similarly, the euphemistic 'Your dog went to the bathroom in my driveway!' describes an event that is equally well captured by 'Your dog shat in my driveway!' Euphemisms have existed throughout recorded history; they are used among preliterate peoples, and have probably been around ever since recognizably human language developed. Likewise has offensive language, what we call 'dysphemism.'

How are euphemism and dysphemism to be defined? Is euphemism necessarily tied in with taboo? What topics are taboo? Why are women's bodies so strongly tabooed? Do euphemism and dysphemism reflect the intrinsic conflict between intellect and body within human beings? What sorts of euphemisms are there? Where do conventional euphemisms and dysphemisms come from? How are euphemism and dysphemism related to one another? How are they related to neutral terms, if there are such things? Why is it that the euphemism of yesteryear (e.g., 'toilet') is replaced by a new one ('bathroom')? How do euphemism and dysphemism relate to slang and jargons? What makes people swear? How many euphemisms are there in English for the genital organs? All these questions and many more are broached in this book.

Like many books, this one came to be written as the result of an accident. A student drew Keith Allan's attention to the following passage in *Introduction to Language* by Fromkin et al.:

> What is surprising is that two words or expressions can have the identical linguistic meaning and one can be acceptable for use and the other strictly forbidden or the cause of embarrassment or horror. In English, words which we have borrowed

> from Latin or French seem to carry with them a "scientific" connotation and thus appear to be technical terms and "clean", while good old native Anglo-Saxon words are taboo. This seems to reflect the view that the vocabulary used by the upper classes was clearly superior to that used by the lower classes, a view that was, of course, held and propagated by the upper classes. Peter Farb points out that this distinction must go back at least as far as the Norman conquest in 1066, when "a duchess *perspired* and *expectorated* and *menstruated*—while a kitchen maid *sweated* and *spat* and *bled*." (Fromkin et al. 1984:271f)

The freshman student took this to imply that speakers of old and medieval Germanic dialects did not use euphemisms. Whether or not this is an appropriate inference from the preceding text, it is historically false. Because Kate Burridge had worked with, among other things, the language of Middle Dutch medical texts, we got together to compare euphemism in present-day English and in Middle Dutch. The more deeply we delved into euphemism, the greater the project grew. We found it necessary to distinguish euphemisms from dysphemisms, then to sort them into types, next to tease out the effects of style and jargon, and so forth. Before long, what began as a short paper expanded into the present book.

In the course of our investigations we discovered that, when it comes to largely oral traditions such as slang and obscenity, different dialect groups will frequently have different interpretations for a common form—which suggests that the common written language has a levelling effect on English dialects. We also came to suspect that there is a wealth of unexplored vocabulary in oral culture; for instance, what Australian author Nancy Keesing has called 'Shielaspeak' (i.e., colloquial language used among women on topics to do with women). One of the most striking effects of our journey into oral culture was to be sharply reminded of the delightful inventiveness of so much of its terminology; the overwhelming majority of language examples discussed in linguistic textbooks are sterile fragments of the rich language that they supposedly identify. There can be no doubt at all that Lakoff and Johnson were correct in observing that

> most people think they can get along perfectly well without metaphor. We have found, on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.
> (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:3)

There is plenty of confirmatory evidence within this book.

We had a lot of fun gathering material for the book; and a lot of help getting it together. Our great pleasure is to express special gratitude to John Haiman, Bill McGregor, Heidi Weber Platt, Cynthia Read, Ross Weber, and the anonymous reader for Oxford University Press: without their help the text would have been much worse than it is. They are, course, all blameless for the remaining flaws. We were also offered useful chunks and snippets of information by a large number of supportive friends, students, and colleagues to whom we hereby offer our heartfelt thanks; they are: Wendy Allen, Larry Audette, Tony Barta, Barry Blake, Bill Bright, Carol Budge, Sarah Castle, Hilary Chappell, Sandra Cootes, Susanna Cumming, Dick Demers, Charlotte Dihoff, Bruce Donaldson, Diana Eades, Sue Favret,

George Gunter, Liza Harris, Marion Harris, Lliam Harrison, Linden Hilgendorf, Greg Horseley, Wim Hüskin, Rhys Isaac, Sakarepe Kamene (for information on Zia), Judy Kermode, Tomiko Kodama (Japanese), Terry Langendoen, Adrienne Lehrer, Lise Menn, Jack Murphy, Suzanne Murphy, Peng Long (Chinese), Sugu Pillai (Malaysian Tamil), John Platt (whose untimely death we mourn), David Potts, Ellen Prince (Yiddish), Doug Saddy, Paul Saka, Mel Scullen, Pornpimol Senawong (Thai), Jae Song, Nik Suriana Nik Yusoff (Bahasa Malaysia), Putu Wijana (Bahasa Indonesia), Monty Wilkinson, Lesley Wright, Zhang Shi (Chinese). Keith Allan is very grateful to the Department of Linguistics at the University of Arizona for generous access to facilities during the time he spent there. Perhaps we should add our thanks for the use of the facilities provided by our regular employers, Monash University and La Trobe University, respectively. Finally, we pay tribute to Don Laycock who was especially generous in lending us his collection of *Maledictas* and one or two other texts; we were anticipating his advice on our final draft, but unfortunately he died long before it was finished. We think that Don might have enjoyed this book, even though he would not have agreed with everything in it. Thanks Don, wherever you are.

We offer *Euphemism and Dysphemism* to our readers with the wish that they will concomitantly enjoy the book and benefit, as we have done, from the study of its subject matter. An interesting perspective on the human psyche is to be gained from the study of euphemisms used as a shield against the disapprobation of our fellows or at worst death, and from the examination of dysphemisms used as a weapon against those we dislike or as a release valve against the vicissitudes of malign fate. Many euphemisms and dysphemisms demonstrate the poetic inventiveness of ordinary people: they reveal a folk culture that has been paid too little attention by lexicographers, linguists, and literaticians—and, indeed, by the very folk who use them: you, me, and our friends and relatives. We hope the reader will come to share our respect for 'la masse parlante,' as Saussure (the father of modern linguistics) called them. Yet perhaps we should rather be referring here to the masses for whom Shakespeare's comedy was written, those among 'la masse parlante' who would appreciate the double-meanings in, for instance, what Margaret says in the following girl-talk:

HERO God give me joy to wear it, for my heart is exceeding heavy.
MARGARET 'Twill be heavier soon by the weight of a man.
HERO Fie upon thee, art not ashamed?
MARGARET Of what, lady? Of speaking honourably? Is not marriage honourable in a beggar? Is not your lord honourable without marriage? I think you would have me say, saving your reverence, 'a husband'. And bad thinking do not wrest true speaking, I'll offend nobody. Is there any harm in 'the heavier for a husband'? None, I think, and it be the right husband, and the right wife; otherwise 'tis light, and not heavy. Ask my Lady Beatrice else; here she comes.
Enter Beatrice
HERO Good morrow, coz.
BEATRICE Good morrow, sweet Hero.

HERO Why, how now? Do you speak in the sick tune?
BEATRICE I am out of all other tune, methinks.
MARGARET Clap's into 'Light o' Love'; that goes without a burden. Do you sing it, and I'll dance it.
BEATRICE Ye light o' love, with your heels! Then, if your husband have stables enough, you'll see he shall lack no barns.
MARGARET O illegitimate construction! I scorn that with my heels.
BEATRICE 'Tis almost five o'clock, cousin; 'tis time you were ready. By my troth, I am exceeding ill—heigh-ho!
MARGARET For a hawk, a horse, or a husband?
BEATRICE For the letter that begins them all, H.
MARGARET Well, and you be not turn'd Turk, there's no more sailing by the star.
BEATRICE What means the fool, trow?
MARGARET Nothing I, but God send everyone their heart's desire!
HERO These gloves the Count sent me, they are an excellent perfume.
BEATRICE I am stuffed, cousin, I cannot smell.
MARGARET A maid, and stuffed! There's goodly catching of cold.
BEATRICE O, God help me, God help me, how long have you professed apprehension?
MARGARET Ever since you left it. Doth not my wit become me rarely?
BEATRICE It is not seen enough, you should wear it in your cap. By my troth, I am sick.
MARGARET Get you some of this distilled *carduus benedictus*, and lay it to your heart, it is the only thing for a qualm.
HERO There you prick'st her with a thistle.
BEATRICE *Benedictus!* why *benedictus?* You have some moral in this *benedictus*.
MARGARET Moral! no, by my troth, I have no moral meaning, I meant, plain holy-thistle.

(SHAKESPEARE *Much Ado About Nothing* III.iv.23–74)

This is one text we shall not be explaining; should you feel you need help interpreting it, we can recommend you get hold of *Shakespeare's Bawdy* by Eric Partridge, and use it as a primer. But be assured, dear reader, that you will not need help with the rest of this book (though we do provide a Glossary). And, as you turn the pages, we entreat you to enjoy the products of the human mind as it confronts the problem of how to talk in different contexts about body parts, bodily functions, sex, lust, disapproval, anger, hate, disease, death, fear, and God.

Melbourne, Australia K. A.
September 1990 K. B.

P.S. We shall be glad to hear from readers who wish to offer observations on any of the matters we touch on in this book, or who wish to enlighten our ignorance with information we have omitted and s/he believes we ought to have included. Write to us in Australia at the Linguistics Department at either Monash University, Clayton, Victoria 3168 or La Trobe University, Bundoora, Victoria 3083.

Contents

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Euphemism and Dysphemism

Introductory Remarks on Language Used as Shield and Weapon

Knowing ignorance is strength.
Ignoring knowledge is sickness.
(Lao Tsu *Tao Te Ching* 71)

The principal purpose of this book is to give an expository and explanatory account of the kinds of expressions people use for two quite different purposes: euphemism and dysphemism. Euphemism is characterized by avoidance language and evasive expression; that is, Speaker uses words as a protective shield against the anger or disapproval of natural or supernatural beings. If this seems too negative, we can alternatively describe euphemism as "expression that seeks to avoid being offensive." Dysphemism is, roughly speaking, the contrary of euphemism. Investigating dysphemism, we examine the verbal resources for being offensive, being abusive, or just letting off steam. We approach the subject in the spirit demonstrated in classical works like Durkheim's *Incest: The Nature and Origin of the Taboo* (1963 [1897]), Frazer's *The Golden Bough Part II: Taboo and The Perils of the Soul* (1911), and Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1953 [1913]). But because our background is linguistics, not sociology, anthropology, or psychology, we—unlike these particular authors—show that euphemism and dysphemism are not merely a response to taboo: they also function where Speaker avoids using, or, on the contrary, deliberately decides to use, a distasteful expression and/or an infelicitous style of addressing or naming. And we also set forth a classification of euphemisms and dysphemisms according to their formal and functional characteristics. We include examples like the following: the ancient Greeks called *The Furies* "the well-minded ones"—*Eumenides*; a Middle Dutch physician talks of *figs in the secret passage* to denote "piles"; in the nineteenth century, the Victorian moral code prevented those in polite society from uttering words like *legs*, *trousers* or *underclothing*; some fishermen still avoid words alluding to women and certain kinds of land animals during a fishing expedition; people say *jiminy cricket* instead of *Jesus Christ*; and newspapers still occasionally

print *f*— for you-know-what; a politician speaks of a *categorical inaccuracy* or *misspeaking* himself instead of admitting he lied; people get *selected out* rather than *dismissed* or *fired*; the cricketer (but, we regret to admit, neither of us) can make sense of *a man at deep fine leg and another at wide mid-on*: this is jargon, and jargon can be dysphemistic to outgroupers; for instance, when doctors refer to a *circumorbital hematoma* instead of *black eye* they are using jargon, but if a doctor advises a terminally ill patient *Perhaps you had better get your affairs in order* it is to avoid mentioning death, a topic strongly tabooed almost everywhere; in the United States, the brand name of a pencil was changed from *Mikado* to *Mirado* during World War II; and during the 1914–1918 war, *machine gun* occasionally became *sewing machine*; the push for nonsexist usage has rendered words like *manhole cover* and *chairman* taboo for many people; and so forth. The list is extremely heterogeneous and seemingly endless; but in the chapters that follow we attempt to impose order on apparent chaos.

When we seek to explain the sources of the metaphors and figures that have been created for euphemistic or dysphemistic purposes, we step into lexicology. But we emphasize that our book is NOT (and was never intended to be) a dictionary of euphemism and dysphemism; there are already many such volumes in existence (e.g., Grose 1811, Farmer and Henley 1890–1904; Partridge 1961, 1970, 1984; Fryer 1963; Wentworth and Flexner 1975; Read 1977; Rawson 1981, 1989; Spears 1982; Neaman and Silver 1983; Paros 1984; and McDonald 1988, to cite just a few). Our aim is not to outdo or even replicate these treasure troves of euphemism and dysphemism, so you, the reader, will probably be able to think up many more examples of euphemistic and dysphemistic usage than we shall write about. Words are powerful things, and the reticence and fear that some taboo terms arouse in us can be strong. The word *cancer*, for example, has come to be equated with malignancy, corruption, and death; so it is generally shunned. People generally prefer to talk about *growths* and *tumors*, both of which CAN be benign, whereas a view prevails that cancer cannot. Different connotations motivate the choice between these different vocabulary items. If this seems to imply that euphemism and dysphemism are matters of purely lexical choice, that is not in fact the case. We shall show, in the course of this book, that euphemism and dysphemism are principally determined by the choice of expression within a given context: both world spoken **of**, and the world spoken **in**. We cannot properly judge something as euphemistic or dysphemistic without this information—which is why dictionaries of euphemisms are never entirely successful. The proof of this should become evident in various of the chapters that follow.

As we have said, we offer an analysis of the motivations behind these different kinds of language use, a classification of them, an occasional history, and a functional account of the various expressions of euphemism and dysphemism. And we develop the notion that euphemism and dysphemism are defined by reference to concerns about face, concerns that are of immense significance on any occasion of language interchange (see the Glossary, and also Allan 1986a; Brown and Levinson 1987). Talking is one of the most pervasive of human social activities, and like all the others, can only successfully take place if participants mutually recognize that certain conventions govern their own actions and use of language, and also their

interpretations of the actions and utterances of others. For instance, there are conventions governing how close to one another interlocutors should stand; how to begin and end phone conversations; how to show interest in what Speaker is saying, how to make requests politely or sharply, or how to offer thanks. There is a presumption that both Speaker and Hearer will act reasonably and cooperatively, and we interpret Speaker's utterances accordingly. Furthermore, Speaker does not randomly chose the forms and style to use in making an utterance; s/he normally has some reason for selecting the particular ones used—a reason sought by Hearer (not necessarily consciously) when interpreting Speaker's utterance. Grice (1975) recognized four different kinds of cooperation governing the most typical forms of social behavior. He formulated them as maxims prescribing the norms of behavior that participants are expected to observe during a linguistic exchange, although they may occasionally choose not to do so. We have adapted the Gricean originals to cover a greater range of data than he envisaged. There is the maxim of quantity: SPEAKER SHOULD MAKE THE STRONGEST CLAIM POSSIBLE CONSISTENT WITH HIS/HER PERCEPTION OF THE FACTS, WHILE GIVING NO MORE AND NO LESS INFORMATION THAN IS REQUIRED TO MAKE HIS/HER MESSAGE CLEAR TO HEARER. It would normally be dysphemistic to say things like *My neighbor, who is a woman, is pregnant*, because it contains an unnecessary relative clause; we know that if the neighbor is pregnant, it MUST be a woman. Second, there is the maxim of quality: SPEAKER SHOULD BE GENUINE AND SINCERE. That is, Speaker should state as facts only what s/he believe to be facts; make offers and promises only if s/he intends carrying them out; pronounce judgments only if s/he is in a position to judge, and so on; thus, we, the authors, would be violating the maxim of quality if we were to say *We believe this book is suitable bedtime reading for six year olds*. Violations of the quality maxim are normally dysphemistic. Third, is the maxim "be relevant," which Grice called relation: IN GENERAL, AN UTTERANCE SHOULD NOT BE IRRELEVANT TO THE CONTEXT IN WHICH IT IS UTTERED, BECAUSE THAT MAKES IT DIFFICULT FOR HEARER TO COMPREHEND; and we presume that Speaker has some reason for making this utterance in this context, in the particular form in which it occurs, rather than maintaining silence or uttering something different. (Sperber and Wilson 1986 argue that 'relevance' is the fundamental principle of language interaction, but we disagree.) Generally speaking, to be irrelevant, is to be dysphemistic. The last maxim of cooperation is manner: WHERE POSSIBLE, SPEAKER'S MEANING SHOULD BE PRESENTED IN A CLEAR, CONCISE MANNER THAT AVOIDS AMBIGUITY, AND AVOIDS MISLEADING OR CONFUSING HEARER THROUGH STYLISTIC INEPTITUDE. Thus, for example, one should ordinarily avoid saying things like *There is a male adult human being in upright stance using his legs as a means of locomotion to propel himself up a series of flat-topped structures some fifteen centimeters high* rather than . . . [we leave it to the reader]. Wasting Hearer's time and mental effort is dysphemistic.

Every time we open our mouths, we have to consider whether what we say is likely to maintain, enhance, or damage our own face, as well as considering the effect of our utterance on others. We have to work to create the effect we intend to create; Goffman refers to this as "face-work". Social interaction is generally oriented towards maintaining (= saving) face, and one of the ground rules in an encounter is a tacit agreement between the different parties that everyone should operate with

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