

Euphemisms

History

Euphemisms are words we use to soften the reality of what we are communicating to a given listener or reader. They are a universal feature of language usage; all cultures typically use them to talk about things they find terrifying (e.g., war, sickness, death) because, anthropologically, "to speak a name was to evoke the divinity whose power then had to be confronted" Similarly, we use euphemisms to express taboos, as we feel, on some instinctual level, that the euphemism keeps us at safe distance from the taboo itself. Another use of euphemisms is to elevate the status of something (e.g., using educator for teacher, attorney for lawyer); but in general, we use euphemisms to express what is socially difficult to express in direct terms.

A great number of euphemisms in English come from words with Latinate roots. After the Norman Conquest of England in 1066, the community began to make a distinction between a genteel and an obscene vocabulary, between the Latinate words of the upper class and the lusty Anglo-Saxon of the lower.

In all languages there are subjects that can be difficult to talk about, because the original words for these subjects can offend or embarrass the person one is addressing. Euphemisms are softer than the original words. For example death is often talked about with euphemisms such as pass on or go to heaven.

The following words:

1. poor
2. fat
3. old

are often euphemized in English. Do you know any euphemisms for them?

‘Translate’ the following sentences into clear, ‘straightforward’ English.

- His grandfather passed away.
- My father is between jobs but has two interviews today.
- The sales associate answered in the affirmative when the judge asked him if he had ever been incarcerated.
- The manager complained to his administrative assistant of inventory shrinkage.
- Our son is a special child.
- Dan's supervisor laid him off because he was unmotivated.
- The correctional facility has 220 inmates, five of whom are facing capital punishment.

Exercises

I. Match the words with euphemisms.

1. accident	a) security breach
2. addiction	b) response from
3. bombing	c) incident
4. break-in	d) life insurance
5. complaint from	e) chemical dependency
6. death insurance	f) capital punishment
7. death penalty	g) body count
8. deaths	h) air support

II. Which is the ordinary word, which is the euphemism?

1. to fire – to downsize
2. intoxicated – drunk
3. sanitation person – garbage collector
4. genocide – ethnic cleansing
5. informer – confidential source
6. lazy – unmotivated
7. inaccuracy – lie
8. funds – money
9. ugly – unattractive
10. lingerie - underwear

III. Read the euphemisms. What is the more straightforward way of expressing the same?

1. golden years
2. individual
3. low-income
4. issue, challenge, complication
5. mentally challenged
6. administrative assistant
7. indisposed
8. source of information

IV. Find euphemisms in the following sentences. What do they mean?

1. Are there any public conveniences nearby?
2. Steve is between jobs at the moment.
3. She was in the family way so they got married.
4. The newspaper said the president said the president was tired and emotional.

5. The boss is known for being economical with the truth.
6. I'm afraid I can't come to the restaurant with you. I am financially embarrassed.

V. Invent your own examples of euphemisms for the following words.

1. fat
2. old persons' home
3. beggar
4. criminal (adj)
5. crippled
6. death
7. exploit (land)
8. drugs
9. used
10. steal

Dysphemisms , cacophemisms

In language, both **dysphemism** and **cacophemism** refer to the usage of an intentionally harsh word or expression instead of a polite one; they are rough opposites of euphemism. Dysphemisms may be offensive or merely humorously deprecating, cacophemisms are deliberately offensive.

Are the following examples, in your opinion, dysphemisms or cacophemisms?

1. His grandfather is pushing up daisies.
2. Fascist - someone who does not believe in fascism as such yet advocates for harsher laws or more power vested in a central authority.
3. Idiot box – Television.
4. Dead tree edition - often original, printed version of on-line resource.
5. Meatspace - physical reality, as opposed to "cyberspace"
6. Zombie Jesus Day - Easter.

Read the article. The euphemisms have been blanked out and appear under the article. Put them in the correct place in the article.

STOP BEING COY!
I will die – not ‘pass away’.

I am an old cripple, drawing an old-age pension, working hard to raise vast quantities of vegetables on an allotment and well aware that, one of these days, I shall die. All this is fact.

If, however, I listen to the voice of officialdom, it turns out that I am a 1_____, registered as 2_____, drawing a 3_____, renting a 4_____ and presumably immortal, because I shall never die – I shall merely 5_____.

According to Encyclopaedia Britannica, ‘Euphemisms are considered overly squeamish and affected by contemporary writers, unless used for humorous effect’. This may be so among the cognoscenti but there is little evidence to show that the masses, especially the administrators, have read their encyclopaedia. The clichés which pour from the lips of trade union leaders are endless. 6_____ or 7_____ equals ‘going on strike’ and 8_____ equals ‘being bloody minded’.

These more robust euphemisms may, for all I care, stay. But let us, please, do away with the following: 10_____ (poor), 11_____ (ill), 12_____ (stupid), 13_____ (dole), 14_____ (Ministry of War), 15_____ (talk), and 16_____ (pet).

All this effort to avoid unpleasantness is certain to fail, because the euphemism quickly acquires the stigma of the word it replaced. I, and probably others, do not feel younger because I am called a ‘senior citizen’.

- a) withdrawing our service
- b) leisure garden
- c) pass away
- d) low IQ
- e) Ministry of Defence
- f) companion animal
- g) disadvantaged senior citizen
- h) working to rule
- i) unemployment benefit
- j) disabled
- k) under the weather
- l) retirement pension
- m) lower income brackets
- n) taking industrial action
- o) have a dialogue

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