A **euphemism** is an expression intended by the speaker to be less offensive, disturbing, or troubling to the listener than the word or phrase it replaces.

When a phrase is used as a euphemism, it often becomes a metaphor whose literal meaning is dropped. Euphemisms are often used to hide unpleasant or disturbing ideas, even when the literal term for them is not necessarily offensive. This type of euphemism is used in public relations and politics, where it is sometimes called doublespeak. There are also superstitious euphemisms, based (consciously or unconsciously) on the idea that words have the power to bring bad fortune (for example, not speaking the word "cancer") and religious euphemisms, based on the idea that some words are sacred, or that some words are spiritually imperiling.

The converse of a euphemism is a **dyslogism**, literally "bad-speech" or "bad-reason (logic)".

**The "euphemism treadmill"**

Euphemisms can eventually become taboo words themselves through a process the linguist Steven Pinker has called the **euphemism treadmill** (cf. Gresham's Law in economics).

Words originally intended as euphemisms may lose their euphemistic value, acquiring the negative connotations of their referents. In some cases, they may be used mockingly and become dysphemistic.

For example, *toilet room*, itself a euphemism, was replaced with *bathroom* and *water closet*, which were replaced (respectively) with *rest room* and *W.C.*; similarly, *funeral director* replaced *mortician*, which replaced *undertaker*. In American English, the original sense of *homely* ("comfortable, cozy") has been superseded by the once-euphemistic sense "plain-looking," which is now simply insulting ("ugly").

Connotations easily change over time. *Idiot* was once a neutral term, and *moron* a similar one. Negative senses of a word tend to crowd out neutral ones, so the word *retarded* was pressed into service to replace them. Now that too is considered rude, and as a result, new terms like *mentally challenged* or *special* are starting to replace *retarded*. In a few decades, calling someone *special* may well be a grave insult. A similar progression occurred with

*crippled → handicapped → disabled*

The euphemism treadmill also occurs with notions of profanity and obscenity. Words once called "offensive" were later described as "objectionable," and later "questionable."

A complementary "dysphemism treadmill" exists, but is more rarely observed. One modern example is the word "sucks." "That sucks" began as American slang for "that is very unpleasant", and is shorthand for "that sucks dick." It developed over the late-20th century from being an extremely vulgar phrase to near-acceptability.

**Classification of euphemisms**
Many euphemisms fall into one or more of these categories:

- Terms of foreign origin (*derriere, copulation, perspire, urinate*)
- Abbreviations (*SOB* for "son of a bitch")
- Abstractions (*it, the situation, go*)
- Indirections (*behind, unmentionables*)
- Mispronunciation (*goldarnit, freakin*)
- Plays on abbreviations (*"barbecue sauce" for "bull shit")

There is some disagreement over whether certain terms are or are not euphemisms. For example, sometimes the phrase *visually impaired* is labeled as a politically correct euphemism for *blind*. However, visual impairment can be a broader term, including, for example, people who have partial sight in one eye, a group that would be excluded by the word *blind*.

There are three antonyms of euphemism, *dysphemism, cacophemism, and power word*. The first can be either offensive or merely humorously deprecating with the second one generally used more often in the sense of something deliberately offensive. The last is used mainly in arguments to make one's point seem more correct than opponent's.

**The evolution of euphemisms**

Euphemisms may be formed in a number of ways. *Periphrasis or circumlocution* is one of the most common -- to "speak around" a given word, implying it without saying it. Over time, circumlocutions become recognized as established euphemisms for particular words or ideas.

To alter the pronunciation or spelling of a taboo word (such as a swear word) to form a euphemism is known as *taboo deformation*. There are an astonishing number of taboo deformations in English, of which many refer to the infamous four-letter words. In American English, words which are unacceptable on television, such as *fuck*, may be represented by deformations such as *freak* — even in children's cartoons. Some examples of Cockney rhyming slang may serve the same purpose — to call a person a *berk* sounds less offensive than to call him a *cunt*, though *berk* is short for *Berkshire Hunt* which rhymes with *cunt*.

Bureaucracies such as the military and large corporations frequently spawn euphemisms of a more deliberate (and to some, more sinister) nature. Organizations coin *doublespeak* expressions to describe objectionable actions in terms that seem neutral or inoffensive. Militaries at war frequently do kill people, sometimes deliberately and sometimes by mistake; in doublespeak, the first may be called *neutralizing the target* and the second *collateral damage*. Likewise, industrial unpleasantness such as pollution may be toned down to *outgassing* or *runoff* — descriptions of physical processes rather than their damaging consequences. Some of this may simply be the application of precise technical terminology in the place of popular usage, but beyond precision, the advantage of technical terminology may be its lack of emotional undertones, while the disadvantage being the lack of real life context.

**Euphemisms for the profane**
Profane words and expressions are generally taken from three areas: religion, excretion, and sex. While profanities themselves have been around for some time, their limited use in public and by the media has only in the past decade become socially acceptable, and there are still many expressions which cannot be used in polite conversation. The common marker of acceptability would appear to be used on prime-time television or in the presence of children. Thus, *damn* (and most other religious profanity) is acceptable, and as a consequence, euphemisms for religious profanity have taken on a very stodgy feeling. Excretory profanity such as *piss* and *shit* may be acceptable in adult conversation, while euphemisms like *Number One* and *Number Two* are preferred for use with children. Most sexual terms and expressions either remain unacceptable for general use or have undergone radical rehabilitation (*penis* and *vagina*, for instance).

**Religious euphemisms**

Euphemisms for God, Jesus, and Christ are used to avoid taking the name of God in a vain oath, which would violate one of the Ten Commandments. Euphemisms for hell, damnation, and the devil, on the other hand, are often used to avoid invoking the power of the adversary.

**Excretory euphemisms**

While *urinate* and *defecate* are not euphemisms, they are used almost exclusively in a clinical sense. The basic Anglo-Saxon words for these functions, *piss* and *shit*, are considered vulgarities, despite the use of *piss* in the King James Bible (in Isaiah 36:12 and elsewhere).

The word *manure*, referring to animal feces used as fertilizer for plants, literally means "worked with the hands", alluding to the mixing of manure with earth. Several zoos market the byproduct of elephants and other large herbivores as *Zoo Doo*, and there is a brand of chicken manure available in garden stores under the name *Cock-a-Doodle Doo*.

There are any number of lengthier periphrases for excretion used to excuse oneself from company, such as to *powder one's nose* or to *see a man about a horse* (or dog). Slang expressions which are neither particularly euphemistic nor dysphemistic, such as *take a leak*, form a separate category.

**Sexual euphemisms**

The term *pudendum* for the genitals literally means "shameful thing". *Groin* and *crotch* refer to a larger region of the body, but are euphemistic when used to refer to the genitals.

Virtually all other sexual terms are still considered profane and unacceptable for use even in a euphemistic sense.

**Euphemisms for death**

The English language contains numerous euphemisms related to dying, death, burial, and the people and places which deal with death. The practice of using euphemisms for death is likely to
have originated with the "magical" belief that to speak the word 'death' was to invite death (where to "draw Death's attention" is the ultimate bad-fortune -- a common theory holds that death is a taboo subject in most English-speaking cultures for precisely this reason).

Most commonly, one is not dying, rather, fading quickly because the end is near. Death is referred to as having passed away or departed. Deceased is a euphemism for 'dead', and sometimes a dead person may be referred to as "late" (i.e.: "The late (name)"). Sometimes the deceased is said to have gone to a better place, but this is used primarily among the religious with a concept of heaven.

There are many euphemisms for the dead body, some polite and some profane, as well as dysphemisms such as worm food, or dead meat. The corpse was once referred to as the shroud (or house or tenement) of clay, and modern funerary workers use terms such as the loved one (title of a novel about Hollywood undertakers by Evelyn Waugh) or the dearly departed. (They themselves have given up the euphemism funeral director for grief therapist, and hold arrangement conferences with relatives.) Among themselves, mortuary technicians often refer to the corpse as the client.

Contemporary euphemisms for death tend to be quite colorful, and someone who has died is said to have passed away, passed on, bit the big one, bought the farm, croaked, given up the ghost, kicked the bucket, gone south, tits up, shuffled off this mortal coil (from William Shakespeare's Hamlet), or assumed room temperature. When buried, they may be said to be pushing up daisies or taking a dirt nap. There are hundreds of such expressions in use.

Euthanasia also attracts euphemisms. One may put him out of his misery, or put him to sleep, the latter phrase being used primarily with non-human animals.

There are a few euphemisms for killing which are neither respectful nor playful, but rather clinical and detached. Some examples of this type are terminate, wet work, to take care of one or to take them for a ride, to do them in, off, frag, smoke, or waste someone. To cut loose (from U.S. Sgt. Massey's account of activities during the occupation of Iraq of the early 21st century) or open up on someone, means 'to shoot at with every weapon available'.

The Dead Parrot Sketch from Monty Python's Flying Circus contains an extensive list of euphemisms for death, referring to the deceased parrot that the character played by John Cleese purchases. A similar passage occurs near the beginning of The Twelve Chairs, where Bezenchuk, the undertaker, astonishes Vorobyanninov with his classification of people by the euphemisms used to speak of their deaths.

**Doublespeak**

What distinguishes doublespeak from other euphemisms is its deliberate usage by governmental, military, or corporate institutions. A simple example would be the use of the word casualties instead of deaths, or taking friendly fire as a euphemism for being attacked by your own troops; see other examples on the list of euphemisms.

Commentators such as Noam Chomsky and George Orwell have written at length about the dangers of allowing such euphemisms to shape public perceptions and national policy.
Common examples

Other common euphemisms include:

- *restroom for toilet room* (the word *toilet* was itself originally a euphemism). This is an Americanism.
- *making love to, playing with or sleeping with* for *having sexual intercourse with*
- *motion discomfort bag and air-sickness bag for vomit bag*
- *sanitary landfill for garbage dump*
- *the big C for cancer* (in addition, some people whisper the word when they say it in public, and doctors have euphemisms to use in front of patients)
- *bathroom tissue or bath tissue* for *toilet paper* (Usually used by toilet paper manufacturers)
- *custodian for janitor* (also originally a euphemism—in Latin, it means *doorman.*)
- *sanitation worker for "garbage man"*
- *mixologist for bartender*
- *Where can I wash my hands? or Where can I powder my nose?* for *Where can I find a toilet?*. (This is also an Americanism. If this question is asked in Europe to someone not used to American habits the person who asks the question might actually end up at a place where there just only is a washbasin and not at a place equipped according to their needs. On the other hand, Americans might find the more direct question rude if asked by Europeans who don’t know about this euphemism.)

These lists might suggest that most euphemisms are well-known expressions. Often euphemisms can be somewhat situational; what might be used as a euphemism in a conversation between two friends might make no sense to a third person. In this case, the euphemism is being used as a type of innuendo. As an example, in the series *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, the Banks family discusses Hilary's new boyfriend, who happens to be white, using *tall* as a euphemism for *white*. Will, who apparently doesn't catch on, remarks that he is the only one who seems to notice the new boyfriend is white.

The inflation of occupational titles is similar to the euphemism treadmill. For instance, the engineering professions have traditionally resisted the tendency by other technical trades to appropriate the prestige of the title *engineer*. Most people calling themselves *software engineers* or *network engineers* are not, in fact, accredited in engineering. Extreme cases, such as *sanitation engineer for janitor* are cited humorously more often than they are used seriously.

The word euphemism itself can be used as a euphemism. In the animated short *It's Grinch Night* (See Dr. Seuss), a child asks to go to the *euphemism*, where *euphemism* is being used as a euphemism for *outhouse*.

References

• Maledicta: The International Journal of Verbal Aggression (ISSN