

compos mentis

Euphemisms and Praxis: Degradation of Truth and Meaning

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ABSTRACT

Euphemisms—soft, mild and indirect words or phrases that are used in place of harsher, more direct words or phrases—appear to be a ubiquitous phenomenon in the linguistic evolution exhibited in many modern cultures. By replacing harsh words such as “death” with softer terms like “passing away,” euphemistic language can lessen the trauma felt by truths which are hard to bare without lying to oneself outright or averting one’s attention away from one’s problem’s completely. In this essay, however, I will argue that the benefits of euphemisms come with a hidden price for cultures and individuals which use them. In particular, I will argue that euphemisms degrade the truth and meaning of statements by describing them through terms that are by and large devoid of emotional truth. Once the emotional truth has been removed from the statements, the praxis of a society—that is, how that society actively solves their problems and actualizes their ideals—is negatively affected by virtue of the fact that effective communication, which, I will argue, is compromised by the absence of emotional truth, is a vital component of the form of praxis.

KEYWORDS

Euphemisms, Philosophy of Language, Evolution of Language, Praxis, Meaning, Truth

PART I: THE EVOLUTION OF LANGUAGE

For the vast majority of linguists and philosophers of language, much like the biological realm, language itself is an ever-evolving entity. To recognize the results of the evolution of language, one need only compare an antiquated example of one's own language to a modern example and note how alien and different the former seems to the latter—the works of Shakespeare, for instance, seem almost indecipherable to modern readers of English literature, despite the fact that Shakespeare himself wrote in English. This notion is analogous to how, say, *homo habilis*, if observed today, would appear quite indistinguishable from the modern *homo sapiens* despite the fact that *homo sapiens* directly descend from *homo habilis*. Notwithstanding the similarities between the evolution of biological beings and the evolution, the comparison is not altogether analogous—at least one important difference exists. Dissimilar to the evolution of species and biological diversity, the evolution of language does not have a necessary and essential guiding mechanism. In biological evolution, despite the fact that the underlying processes which cause said evolution are essentially random, the end result is always guided in a specific direction. Only the lifeforms which had evolved traits that made them more “fit” to survive their environments survived to pass on their genes, thus increasing the likelihood that whatever beneficial evolved trait(s) that helped them to survive their environment in the first place perpetuated through future generations. This process is necessary for its own existence, as without this guiding mechanism the results of evolution that would either be totally random or directed towards some aim other than survival. In either case, it seems as though life, and therefore also the processes of biological evolution, would cease. In this way, the guiding mechanism of biological evolution is imbued within the essence of the process.

Because language is abiotic and without a physical form and thus does not have to contend with matters of survival, the evolution of language is not dependent on a necessary and essential mechanism which guides it. Language can evolve in so to speak any direction, and, more importantly, for any reason. As a result of this un-predetermined nature of the evolution of language, at least one important consequence arises for humanity, namely, that the evolution of language can be directly manipulated by people to go in a certain direction—whereas humans cannot directly decide what lifeforms are best suited to survive this or that environment (other than by changing the environment itself) and thus

cannot derail the processes of evolution (but rather only arrange ways to use it for their own benefit), the decision as to what terms of language are used seems able to be consciously manipulated. Indeed, the direction manipulation of the evolution language by a person or group of people is prevalent in advanced industrial societies. While the reasons behind such manipulations are diverse, one of the most common purposes seems to be for political correctness or to advance some political or ethical agenda—and one of the most common ways of manipulating the evolution of language so as to reach these desired ends are by employing euphemistic language. In the writing to come, an analysis of euphemistic language will be given, followed by an analysis of how euphemistic language affects philosophical praxis by altering our epistemological standings.

PART II: THE EUPHEMISM AND ITS EVOLUTION

The definition of a euphemism is a word or a phrase that is used to replace another word or phrase that one finds offensive or undesirable. One example of a commonly used euphemism found in the English language is to say that one who has died has “passed away.” Here, the harsh reality of death, which brings with it the grim possibility that the one whom has died is gone into eternal unconsciousness and no longer exists, has been described not as “death” with the term “passed away,” which suggests that the one whom has “passed away” has went away somewhere else, but seems to exclude the possibility of ceasing to exist. Passed away—away to where? More examples of euphemisms can be found in the military lexicon. Listen to them discuss their doings, and one will find that the military rarely “kills” or “murders” anyone, but instead “neutralizes” them. Here again, the grim reality has been stripped away from the term—whereas killing and murdering have thousands of years’ worth of negative connotations and horrors to make the terms “kill” and “murder” near synonymous with evil, the term “neutralize” sounds modern, sterile, and morally ‘neutral.’

As alluded to in the introduction of this work, euphemistic language is an evolution of language with a specific, human-controlled intention. When this intention has been established, the evolution often continues in the direction the intent had pushed it towards—this is to say, the euphemization of the term continues. In his book *When Will Jesus Bring the Porkchops?*, author George Carlin discusses euphemisms in detail, and in one short section tracks the progression of

one such evolution of a euphemized term. In a section titled “Euphemisms: Shell Shock to PTSD” he writes:

“[T]he one thing euphemisms all have in common is that they soften the language. They portray reality as less vivid; they prefer to avoid the truth and not look it in the eye. I think it’s one of the consequences of being fat and prosperous and too comfortable. So, naturally, as time has passed, and we’ve grown fatter and more prosperous, the problem has gotten worse. Here’s a good example:

There’s a condition in combat—most people know it by now. It occurs when a soldier’s nervous system has reached the breaking point. In World War I, it was called *shell shock*. Simple, honest, direct language. Two syllables. Shell shock. Almost sounds like the guns themselves. Shell shock!!

That was 1917. A generation passed. Then, during the Second World War, the very same combat condition was called *battle fatigue*. Four syllables now. It takes a little longer to say, stretches it out. The words don’t seem to hurt as much. And fatigue is a softer than shock. Shell shock. Battle fatigue. The condition was being euphemized. More time passed and we got to Korea, 1950. By that time, Madison Avenue had learned well how to manipulate the language, and the same condition became *operational exhaustion*. It had been stretched out to eight syllables. It took longer to say, so the impact was reduced, and the humanity was completely squeezed out of the term. It was now absolutely sterile: *operational exhaustion*. It sounded like something that might happen to your car.

And then, finally, we got to Vietnam. Given the dishonesty surrounding that war, I guess it’s not surprising that, at that time, the very same condition was renamed *post-traumatic stress disorder*. It was still eight syllables, but a hyphen had been added,

and, at last, the pain had been completely buried under psycho-jargon. Post-traumatic stress disorder.

I'd be willing to bet anything that if we'd still been calling it *shell shock*, some of those Vietnam veterans might have received the attention they needed, at the time they needed it. But it didn't happen, and I'm convinced one of the reasons was that softer language we now prefer: The New Language. The language that takes the life out of life" (Carlin 2004, 39–40).

PART III: EUPHEMISMS AND PRAXIS

If one analyzes Carlin's analysis of the euphemization of the term originally called shell shock to its currently used term post-traumatic stress disorder, one will notice a number of philosophical claims regarding euphemistic language. One of the more interesting and powerful of the claims to be found among Carlin's writing stems from his assertion that if society had still been calling post-traumatic stress disorder by its original name shell shock, then more Vietnam veterans afflicted with the condition would have been helped. If this assessment is true, it amounts to the proposition that euphemisms seem to have a tremendous effect on social praxis, or, in other words, on the way in which a certain social theory or philosophical system is practiced and realized. Within the context of our example, this idea suggests that, if we are assuming that we possess a philosophical or moral system that mandates that we ought to help victims suffering from shell shock, this system was, in practice, somehow nullified or disrupted by referring to the condition as post-traumatic stress disorder. Let us now turn to the question of how the process of such a disruption apparently works.

In order to understand how the disruption of praxis at the hands of euphemistic language described above really works, we will need a further understanding of the process by which a certain philosophical theory leads to a particular social praxis. To understand this process, I believe it will be helpful to break down the process (or form) of praxis into stages, beginning from its natural starting point while working our way toward the conclusion of praxis.

What, then, is the natural starting point of praxis? If praxis is said to be the process in which theory becomes practiced and actualized, then praxis has the

relational form of theory—actualization. Theory, of course, arises from a set of observations of the world, in conjunction with philosophical and logical reasoning about said observations—as such, the relational form of praxis can be expanded from theory—actualization to observation—reasoning—theory—actualization.

If our investigation were concerned solely with the idea of philosophical praxis in a general sense, then observation—reasoning—theory—actualization might suffice for an adequate description of the form of praxis. However, our investigation concerns the effect of euphemistic language on what I call the social praxis, or the way in which society applies their ideologies and values into a set of societal practices and policies. The major difference between praxis and social praxis is that while praxis exists in the individual, a social praxis exists on the societal level and thus must transmit from person to person. If we try to apply the observation—reasoning—theory—actualization to a concept like the social praxis, we will find it to be inadequate, because theory must somehow transmit from person to person to exist on the societal level. There is a gap between the theory—actualization portion of the form. The theory must be passed from person to person in order to actualize, and this passing must have a medium—communication. And so, the form of the social praxis can more adequately be described as observation—reasoning—theory—communication—actualization. Philosopher Calvin Schrag recognized this aspect of the social praxis, writing that “[p]raxis as the manner in which we are engaged in the world...is always entwined with communication (Miller, Ramsey & Schrag 2003, 21).

In what ways does the communication aspect of social praxis occur within society? Although there are multiple answers and possibilities to this question, the most pervasive and influential answer is language, both written and spoken. With this fact considered, we can analyze the effect of euphemistic language on the social praxis. If communication is a major aspect of the form of the social praxis, and this communication is normally mediated by language, then the clarity of this language would seem to play a highly important role in the social praxis. Indeed, this is my argument: euphemistic language, I contend, degrades the clarity of language, thus creating distortions in the social praxis.

In order to understand the claim that euphemistic language degrades the clarity of language thus leading to distortions in the social praxis, the way in which euphemistic language degrades the clarity of language must first be analyzed. Upon analysis, numerous methods are identified as to how this degradation in

clarity occurs. Firstly, as Carlin touched on, there is an aesthetic sense which euphemisms degrade clarity by 'watering down' the emotional salience of language and terms. 'Shell shock' "sounds like the guns themselves," and thus it certainly sounds emotionally salient enough to catch one's attention—comparatively, post-traumatic stress disorder sounds much less severe (everybody becomes stressed sometimes), and as such does away with the original emotional power of the term. In her work *The Practical Study of Argument*, philosopher Trudy Govier describes this diminishing of the emotional salience of terms by the use of euphemisms, writing that "[t]here is a sense in which euphemism is the opposite of emotionally charged language. With emotionally charged language, terms are more emotional than appropriate. Euphemism, on the other hand, involves a kind of whitewashing effect in which descriptions are less emotional than appropriate" (Govier, 2014).

A second, perhaps less apparent way euphemistic language degrades the clarity of language is by creating an additional detachment from the original conveying of the idea. Language attempts to convey an idea by taking an observation and describing it through a designated word or phrase. Any detachment from the original word or phrase carries with it the possibility of a distortion of meaning and clarity. This basic idea is often demonstrated to children in the child's game "telephone" in which one child tells something to another child, and that other child changes, slightly, what has been told to them and then tells another child the slightly changed message who repeats this changing process and so on and so forth for as many children are playing. As an example, suppose one child starts the game by saying "cheetah," and the next child changes this by saying "big cat," and the next child changes this to simply "cat." As can be seen, during every subsequent change in the phrase, the clarity degrades— "cheetah" which creates a very specific image in mind, whereas "big cat" is more ambiguous, and "cat" more ambiguous still. By changing the original phrase, euphemisms open themselves up to the possibility of these types of degradation of clarity and meaning.

With the ways in which euphemisms degrade the clarity of language, it may now be understood how euphemisms create distortions in the social praxis. How, then, do these distortions occur? I contend that euphemistic language distorts the social praxis through interfering with the link between communication and actualization in the form of social praxis described earlier.

The way in which I argue euphemisms interfere with the link between communication and actualization in the form of social praxis relates to philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's picture theory of language, as described in his work *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Wittgenstein's picture theory of language suggests that the world is comprised of a collection of facts and/or ideas that can be mentally pictured through language (Wittgenstein, 1922). By covering up the emotional salience of a term through employing a softer term, euphemisms degrade the luridness of the mental representations produced by the language we used, the effectiveness of communication is degraded, thus leading to problems with the actualization of the social praxis.

An example can help to illustrate the mode of interference described above. Let us analyze closer Carlin's example of shell shock being now described as post-traumatic stress disorder. Consider a nation at war that is experiencing a problem of soldiers experiencing this unfortunate condition and determines that helping these soldiers corresponds with their beliefs and ideology, and desires to adopt a praxis of treating them. If this adoption is to occur, during the communication phase of the social praxis, the military or relevant governing body must find a way to clearly and effectively communicate the nature of problem to the general public so that the public can understand the severity of the condition—only then will the issue be taken seriously enough for a solution to be adopted. Because it is emotionally reminiscent of war and guns themselves, the term "shell shock" clearly describes the severity of the condition it aims to describe, and therefore would be highly conducive of encouraging the actualization of helping those afflicted. The term "post-traumatic stress disorder," on the other hand, carries with it a mental representation that is far less lurid than "shell shock"—Wittgenstein says in his work *Philosophical Investigations* "uttering a word is like striking a note on the keyboard of the imagination (Wittgenstein, 1953). Euphemisms degrade the clarity of this "note," opening the door for misunderstandings to occur in the "language games" Wittgenstein suggests we play with each other (that is, the use of language to try to elicit a certain response or idea out of another). Because the term post-traumatic stress disorder creates such an abstract and indirect representation of the given mental affliction than the term shell shock, a person will be less likely to believe that mental affliction to be a problem worth the effort of solving, thus interfering with the actualization of a social praxis (the helping of those afflicted with shell shock, in this example).

Indeed, several philosophers have been concerned about the potential implications of euphemistic forms of language on the social praxis and individual behavior. Herbert Marcuse, social and political philosopher famous for his role in the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, discussed some of these implications in his book *One-Dimensional Man*. In one instance, Marcuse writes on the abridged language that is commonly observed in the technical, scientific and military spheres of life. He writes:

“Note on abridgement. NATO, SEATO, UN, AFL-CIO, AEC, but also USSR, DDR, etc. Most of these abbreviations are perfectly reasonable and justified by the length of the unabbreviated designata. However, one might venture to see in some of them a ‘cunning of Reason’—the abbreviation may help to repress undesired questions. NATO does not suggest what North Atlantic Treaty Organization says, namely, a treaty among the nations on the North Atlantic—in which case one might ask questions about the membership of Greece and Turkey. USSR abbreviates Socialism and Soviet; DDR: democratic. UN dispenses with undue emphasis on ‘united’; SEATO with those Southeast-Asian countries which do not belong to it. AFL-CIO entombs the radical and political differences which once separated the two organizations, and AEC is just one administrative agency among many others. The abbreviations denote that and only that which is institutionalized in such a way that the transcending connotation is cut off. The meaning is fixed, doctored, loaded. Once it has become an official vocable, constantly repeated in general usage, ‘sanctioned’ by the intellectuals, it has lost all cognitive value and serves merely for recognition of an unquestionable fact” (Marcuse, 1964, 94).

While not all abbreviations are euphemistic in nature, abridged language often seem to serve as epitomical examples of euphemisms. Consider the common abridgement of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, ‘PTSD.’ In this case, the pain of the term (which had already been greatly reduced from its original term shell shock, as Carlin argued for) has been factored out completely. Harsh words like trauma, stress and disorder have been reduced to single letters, empty of any

obvious meaning that could potentially be painful. This abbreviation, Marcuse would claim, alters the praxis by stifling the potential to raise questions towards the reality by presenting 'PTSD' as an 'unquestionable fact.' If this is so, it would certainly seem to create distortions in the communication stage of the social praxis, as that which is 'unquestionable' will ultimately be removed from the social discourse altogether.¹ Indeed, upon analysis the employment of the term 'PTSD' does seem to prevent several important, social praxis-relating questions from being raised. For example, the abbreviated term hides the fact the disorder occurs post-trauma and could therefore be practically eradicated in a world that is trauma-free, thus reducing the potentiality of one raising questions of how to free the world from trauma.²

PART IV: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In this investigation, I have analyzed the effects of euphemisms on the social praxis, arguing that euphemistic language creates an evolution of language that degrades the clarity of language and thus compromises the effectiveness of communication (an essential feature of the form of social praxis), ultimately having negative effect on society. What can be learned from this investigation? It is my belief that the most important lesson to be gleaned is that we ought to be very careful about what language we choose to utilize when discussing important messages—after all, a number of philosophers (most notably Wittgenstein) have suggested that language comprises, to a large extent, our entire reality, and directly determines what we are able to know epistemically speaking. In one part of *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein goes as far as to say that “[p]hilosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language” (Wittgenstein, 1953). These effects of language happen even in contradiction to our will. Euphemisms, after all, are used for mostly good intentions but end up betraying the clarity of the message in the end, having devastating consequences for society. Would, for instance, killing in war persist if we were not so keen on referring to it as “neutralization?” It may perhaps continue, but I nevertheless believe that much fewer people would be willing to “murder than to “neutralize.”

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1. And what is worse is that this exclusion will appear to be completely rational—who in their right mind would question the unquestionable?
 2. Questions some certain despotic states may hope to avoid, insofar as they are dependent upon war and other forces of mass trauma.

If this is so, people ought to employ euphemisms with extreme caution, as it would seem euphemisms could justify even the most heinous of atrocities.

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