Why Do We Use Euphemisms?

Words of Comfort and Words of Deceit

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For nearly all actors it begins at the end of the audition with four words from the auditor, *"Thanks for coming in." . . . "Thanks for coming in"* is a polite entertainment euphemism for *"You suck. Was that the best you could do?"*[1]

Most style guides treat euphemism as a dishonest type of wordiness--something to be avoided in formal essays and reports.

Consider these cautionary notes:

- *In academic writing, . . . you should avoid euphemisms and instead express yourself as directly and honestly as you can.*
- *Euphemisms . . . should usually be avoided in essay writing. In expository writing, and in life, excessive politeness suggests insincerity and evasiveness.*
- *Euphemisms can make your writing sound wordy and pretentious. Whenever possible, avoid this kind of indirect language.*

Most of us would agree that certain euphemisms are, at best, shady and misleading. For example, "revenue enhancement" can be a sneaky way of saying "tax increase," and "downsizing" is usually bureaucratese for "firing employees."

But does that mean *all* euphemisms are inherently dishonest? Decide whether our communication would be improved if in all instances we avoided the expression "passed away" or spelled out the meaning of "the 'N' word."

Simply put, euphemisms come in various disguises, and our motives for employing them are complex.

[1] (Paul Russell, *Acting--Make It Your Business*. Back Stage Books, 2008)

As with other words, the value of a euphemism resides in how, when, and why it's used.

After reading the following passages, identify some of the euphemisms that you're most familiar with. Then decide which of these euphemisms (if any) might be used appropriately in formal writing and be prepared to explain why.

A Definition of *Euphemism*

In selecting euphemistic words and phrases I have accepted [Henry] Fowler's definition: "Euphemism means the use of a mild or vague or periphrastic expression as a substitute for blunt precision or disagreeable use".[2]

In speech or writing, we use euphemism for dealing with taboo or sensitive subjects. It is therefore the language of evasion, hypocrisy, prudery, and deceit.[3]

Euphemisms as Comfort Words

Euphemisms represent a flight to comfort, a way to reduce tension when conversing. They are comfort words. Euphemistic discourse softens the harsh, smooths the rough, makes what's negative sound positive. It is akin to diplomatic language in which "We had a frank exchange of views" might mean, "We hurled insults at each other for a full hour."

Euphemisms add nuance and vagueness to conversation that's often welcome. Could anyone get through a day without heeding a *call of nature* or speculating about whether Jason and Amy may be *sleeping together*? Civilized discourse would be impossible without recourse to indirection. Euphemisms give us tools to discuss touchy subjects without having to spell out what it is we're discussing.[4]

Euphemisms as Dangerous Disguises

"Poor" is not a bad word. Replacing it with euphemisms such as "underprivileged" and "under-served" (as I do elsewhere in this book) are well intentioned and sometimes helpful, but euphemisms are also dangerous. They can assist us in *not seeing*. They can form a scrim through which ugly truth is dimmed to our eyes. There are a lot of poor people in America, and their voices are largely silenced.[5]

Euphemisms as Shields

To speak euphemistically is to use language like a shield against the feared, the disliked, the unpleasant. Euphemisms are motivated by the desire not to be offensive,

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[2] (*Modern English Usage*, 1957)
[3] (R.W. Holder, *Oxford Dictionary of Euphemisms*, 4th ed. Oxford University Press, 2007)
[4] (Ralph Keyes, *Euphemania: Our Love Affair With Euphemisms*. Little, Brown and Company, 2010)
[5] (Pat Schneider, *Writing Alone and With Others*. Oxford University Press, 2003)

and so they have polite connotations; in the least euphemisms seek to avoid too many negative connotations.

They are used to upgrade the denotatum (as a shield against scorn); they are used deceptively to conceal the unpleasant aspects of the denotatum (as a shield against anger); and they are used to display in-group identity (as a shield against the intrusion of out-groupers).[6]

Euphemisms as Secret Agents

Euphemisms are not, as many young people think, useless verbiage for that which can and should be said bluntly; they are like secret agents on a delicate mission, they must airily pass by a stinking mess with barely so much as a nod of the head, make their point of constructive criticism and continue on in calm forbearance. Euphemisms are unpleasant truths wearing diplomatic cologne."[7]

Euphemism as Spin

While in contemporary parlance the use of euphemism is often about sugar-coating, in practice this is not always the case: euphemism can also be used to neutralize politics or negativity, to confuse, to conceal meaning, and to outright deceive. Euphemism is often considered a form of spin, used notably by politicians, bureaucrats, and advertisers to package something--an idea, a policy, a product--as attractive through disingenuous or manipulative means. Such linguistic trickery is, of course, nothing new; its systematic and highly politicized use is thought to have its origins in George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), where "newspeak" was the new language imposed by the state to restrict the lexicon, eliminate gradations of meaning, and, ultimately, control thought.[8]

The Moral Problem of Grotesque Euphemisms

[George] Orwell rightly detested double-talk, cheap euphemism, and deliberate obscurity—the language of “strategic hamlets” and “enhanced interrogation,” and all the other phrases that are used to muddy up meaning. But euphemism is a moral problem, not a cognitive one. When Dick Cheney calls torture “enhanced interrogation,” it doesn’t make us understand torture in a different way; it’s just a means for those who know

[6] (Keith Allen and Kate Burridge, *Euphemism and Dysphemism: Language Used as a Shield and Weapon*. Oxford University Press, 1991)
[7] (Quentin Crisp, *Manners from Heaven*. HarperCollins, 1985)
[8] (Lauren Rosewarne, *American Taboo: The Forbidden Words, Unspoken Rules, and Secret Morality of Popular Culture*. ABC-CLIO, 2013)

they’re doing something wrong to find a phrase that doesn’t immediately acknowledge the wrongdoing. . .

Whatever name Cheney’s men gave torture, they knew what it was. A grotesque euphemism is offensive exactly because we recognize perfectly well the mismatch between the word and its referent. It’s an instrument of evasion, like a speeding getaway car, not an instrument of unconsciousness, like a blackjack.[9]

[9] (Adam Gopnik, "Word Magic." *The New Yorker*, May 26, 2014)