Pedro J. CHAMIZO DOMÍNGUEZ

SOME THESES ON EUPHEMISMS AND DYSPHEMISMS[1]

I. Introduction

Since the publication of Lakoff and Johnson's classical work, *Metaphors We Live By*, it is commonly assumed in (cognitive) linguistics that the majority of metaphors form integral parts of conceptual networks and that our thinking and acting is structured by such metaphors, in short that these are metaphors "we live by". These assumptions have, however, not yet been applied to euphemisms. The aim of this paper is to show that many euphemisms are also structured by their integration into conceptual networks and that we also live by euphemisms. We claim furthermore that euphemisms fulfil several social functions that metaphors do not fulfil.

II. Theses

Thesis No 1

1. If we assume that *metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else* (Aristotle *Poetics* 1457b), *characteristically involves categorial falsity* (Grice 1989:34), is defined as carrying a structure from one conceptual domain (a "source") to another (a "target") (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), and if we discover that all these characteristics also apply to euphemisms and dysphemisms, then euphemisms and dysphemisms should be regarded as metaphors or at least as a special case of metaphor (Bolinger 1982:149). One should then be able to say about euphemisms and dysphemisms what is usually

---

[1] A previous version of this paper was presented at *Mind, language and metaphor: Euroconference on consciousness and the imagination*, Kerkrade (The Netherlands), April, 20–24, 2002.

said about metaphors. But, in spite of the recent boom in the study of metaphor (and other figures of speech) from a linguistic, philosophical, psychological, sociological, etc. point of view, euphemisms and dysphemisms have been studied much less in this way, and only very rarely have Lakoff and Johnson's theories of metaphor been applied to euphemisms (Pfaff, Gibbs and Johnson 1997; and Chamizo Domínguez and Sánchez Benedito 2000).

1.1. *A euphemism is used as an alternative to a dispreferred expression, in order to avoid possible loss of face either one's own face or, through giving offense, that of the audience, or of some third party* (Allan and Burridge 1991:11).

1.2. *A dysphemism is an expression with connotations that are offensive either about the denotatum or to the audience, or both, and it is substituted for a neutral or euphemistic expression for just that reason* (Allan and Burridge 1991:26).

1.3. What is said about euphemisms could be said, *mutatis mutandis*, about dysphemisms.

1.4. The boundaries between dysphemisms and euphemisms are sometimes quite blurred. For that reason a euphemism can become a dysphemism and vice versa (Kröll 1984:12) and many authors include both under the neologism X-phemism. Are French *faire un bras d'honneur*, Italian *fare l'ombrello*, and Spanish *hacer un corte de mangas* (all three approximately "to give someone the fingers" or "to give someone the v-sign") euphemisms or dysphemisms? Certainly, these three idioms could be considered as dysphemistic expressions, but all three could become euphemisms when they substitute other, more bawdy expressions.

Thesis No 2

2. From the synchronic point of view a word can only function as a euphemism if its interpretation remains ambiguous, that is, when the hearer can understand the utterance both in a literal and in a euphemistic way. Ambiguity is unavoidable when we speak euphemistically (Nerlich and Chamizo Domínguez 1999; Nerlich and Clarke 2001). This means that:

2.1. A euphemism cannot be replaced by any other word and still achieve the same cognitive effects.

2.1.1. A euphemism cannot be replaced by the "equivalent" taboo term [We cannot substitute *prophylactic*, *rubber*, *safe*, or *contraceptive* for *condom*] and hope to achieve the same cognitive effects.

2.1.2. A euphemism cannot be replaced by any other euphemism [We cannot substitute *prophylactic* for *rubber*, *safe*, or *contraceptive*] and hope to achieve the same cognitive effects.

2.2. Euphemisms can only be detected in the context of an utterance and their understanding depends on the knowledge, gestures, and beliefs of the interlocutors. Consider examples such as *guidelines* for "censorship" or *referee* for "censor".

2.2.1. Sometimes a word is not taboo at all, but it can become an inconvenient or problematic word in some contexts. In these cases a euphemism is also needed [President Juárez allowed the Daughters of Charity to use the *uniforme internacional de la orden* (international uniform of the order), in order to be able to flout the Mexican Constitution's prohibition of the use of *hábitos religiosos* (religious habits) outside churches].

2.2.2. Sometimes a word is not taboo at all, but it can become a dysphemism in a given context [The word *miss* acquired some dysphemistic flavour in P. Daninos' novel *Les carnets du major W. Marmaduke Thompson* because of the character of Miss Fifth (sic) (Daninos 1990:106–118)].

2.3. Depending on the context of the utterance, beliefs, gestures, or knowledge of the speakers, a given utterance can either be understood literally, metaphorically, euphemistically, dysphemistically, or ironically (Chamizo Domínguez and Sánchez Benedito 1994).

2.4. When the hearer is not (or does not want to be) cooperative the euphemistic effect disappears.

2.4.1. This phenomenon is usually exploited in jokes and literature (Nerlich and Chamizo Domínguez 1999; Nerlich and Clarke 2001).

Thesis No 3

3. From the diachronic point of view we can distinguish between three different stages in the "life" of euphemisms. There are:

3.1. Novel euphemisms [*Discussing Uganda* for "fuck" (*OED*)].

3.2. Semi-lexicalized euphemisms [*Make love* for "fuck" (McDonald 1988:88)].

3.2.1. Conceptual networks are usually built around semi-lexicalized euphemisms (See 5 below).

3.3. Lexicalized or dead euphemisms [*Doctor* for "physician"; or *maid* for "servant" (Kleparski 1997) or Spanish *doncella* and *criada* (both "servant")].

Thesis No 4

4. When a euphemism is lexicalized it usually becomes a taboo term.

4.1. When a euphemism is lexicalized it usually ceases to be ambiguous [in a number of South American countries (e.g. Argentina, Mexico, or Venezuela),

Spanish *coger* "to take", "to catch" can only mean "to fuck"; in Spain, by contrast, it can be used as a euphemism].

4.2. The lexicalization of euphemisms creates polysemy [Spanish *regular* means "normal", "periodic", "according to the rule/ruler" or "exact", but it also means euphemistically "so-so" or "bad" (Chamizo Domínguez and Nerlich 2002)].

4.3. Sometimes the original literal meaning of the word disappears [*Cretin* originally was used as a euphemism for "stupid" or "silly" and meant "Christian" in Old French; *nice* (from Latin *nescius*) meant successively "ignorant", "stupid", "foppish", "fastidious", "precise", "balanced", "agreeable", "pleasant", and eventually "pleasing" (Allan 2000:159–160)].

4.4. When a word ceases to be used as a euphemism it can be used for other purposes [*Preservative* meant euphemistically "condom" in the 18th c. (Kruck 1981:18); by contrast, its cognates in other languages (e.g. Spanish) continue to be used euphemistically and cannot be used for food].

4.5. When the euphemistic meaning of a word is lexicalized and that word becomes a taboo (or at least inconvenient) term, speakers need to mint a new euphemism in order to name the object [*Plural marriage* for "polygamy"; *bathroom* for "toilet" (Sagarin 1968:69–71)].

4.6. When the euphemistic meaning of a word becomes taboo and that meaning becomes the (usual) first order meaning of that word, the non-taboo object must be re-named (in order to avoid ambiguity and inconvenient associations) by using a "safe" word [*Donkey* for "ass"; *rooster* for "cock"].

Thesis No 5

5. Euphemisms can be studied in the way metaphors have been studied.

5.1. Like metaphors, euphemisms and dysphemisms are also part of conceptual networks (Pfaff, Gibbs and Johnson 1997; and Chamizo Domínguez and Sánchez Benedito 2000).

5.1.1. We can refer to dying in terms of *travelling*. So, "To die is TO TRAVEL".

5.1.1.1. To die is to *depart this life*.

5.1.1.2. To die is to *pass over*.

5.1.1.3. To die is to *pass away*.

5.1.1.4. To die is to *go the way of all flesh*.

5.1.1.5. To die is to *meet one's maker*.

5.1.1.6. To die is to *go to Heaven*.

5.1.1.7. To die is to *fly to glory*.

5.1.2. We can refer to coition in terms of travelling. So, "To coit is TO TRAVEL".

5.1.2.1. To copulate is to *accommodate* (*OED*).

5.1.2.2. A prostitute is a *baggage* (*OED*).

5.1.2.3. To look for a client is to *cruise* (*OED*).

5.1.3. We can refer to homosexuals in terms of flowers. So, "A homosexual is A FLOWER".

5.1.3.1. A homosexual is a *buttercup*.

5.1.3.2. A homosexual is a *daffodil*.

5.1.3.3. A homosexual is a *daisy*.

5.1.3.4. A homosexual is a *lily* (*OED*).

5.1.3.5. A homosexual is a *pansy* (*OED*).

5.1.3.6. A homosexual is a *petal* (British military slang).

5.1.4. We can refer to homosexuals in terms of women's names. So, "A homosexual is A WOMAN".

5.1.4.1. A homosexual is a *Jessie/Jessy* (*OED*).

5.1.4.2. A homosexual is a *Mary* (*OED*).

5.1.4.3. A homosexual is a *Mary Ann* (*OED*).

5.1.4.4. A homosexual is a *Nancy/nancy-boy* (*OED*).

5.1.4.5. A homosexual is a *Nancy Dawson* (*OED*).

5.1.4.6. A homosexual is a *Nelly* (*OED*).

5.1.4.7. A homosexual is a *quean* (*OED*).

5.1.4.8. A homosexual is a *queen* (*OED*).

5.1.4.9. A homosexual is a *sissy* (*OED*).

5.2. We also "live by" euphemisms.

Thesis No 6

6. Euphemism fulfils several, relevant social functions, which differ from the functions of metaphors. Their main function consists in concealing or disguising an unpleasant object or the unpleasant effects of that object. This general function covers a host of minor functions. Euphemisms can be used:

6.1. In order to be polite or respectuous [*Lady wife* for "wife" or "spouse"].

6.2. In order to convey dignity to a (menial) profession or job [Spanish *barman* for *camarero* "waiter"; *maître* for "head waiter"; *flight assistant* for "stewardess"].

6.2.1. Borrowings are frequently used as euphemisms, particularly when the borrowed words are taken from a language, which is considered more cultured, elegant or refined (Sagarin 1968:47–49).

6.3. In order to respect the dignity of a person who suffers from an illness [*Trisomic of the par 21* or *Suffering of Down's syndrome* for "mongol"], or is in a painful situation [*Third agers* or *senior citizens* for "olds"].

6.4. In order to attenuate a painful topic [*Sleep in the Lord* or *Give up the ghost* for "die"].

6.5. In order to be politically correct.

6.5.1. So-called "politically correct language" is basically euphemistic [*Formative* or *classical* for "seminal" (Chamizo Domínguez and Nerlich 2002)].

6.6. In order to be able to manipulate objects "ideologically" [*Embryolike entity* for "foetus" or "embryo" (Mitchell 2001)]. This change in language makes it easier to manipulate "*embryolike entities*", whereas you may not have wanted to manipulate a "foetus".

6.6.1. Euphemisms are "corrosive" words (Mitchell 2001), but they are also unavoidable in everyday language.

6.7. In order to avoid ethnic or sexual slurs [Spanish *subsahariano/ subsahariana* for *negro/negra* (black); English *Afro-American* for "black"; *gay* for "queer" or *lesbian* for "tomboy"].

6.8. In order to name a taboo object or action. Namely:

6.8.1. God and religion, especially in order to avoid blasphemies (Allan 2000:156–157) [*Gosh* for "God"].

6.8.2. Sexual objects or actions [*To know*, *to bed*, *to be with*, *to spend the night with*, *to take*, or *to have* for "to fuck"].

6.8.3. Bodily effluvia [*Perspire* for "sweat"; *expectorate* for "spit"; *roses* for "menstruation"].

6.8.4. Dirty or dangerous places [The classic western entitled *The Cheyenne Social Club* for "The Cheyenne Brothel"; *churchyard* for "cemetery"].

6.8.5. Death (see 5.1.1. above) and maladies [*Forget-me-not* for "syphilis" or "gonorrhoea"; *social disease* for "venereal disease" (*OED*); German *Lustseuche*, for "syphilis"].

Thesis No 7

7. Although there are many other sources (borrowings, phonetic similarities, acronyms, allusions, verbal plays, back formations, diminutives, etc.) for the creation of euphemisms (Allan 2000:164–169; Casas Gómez 1986:97–251), many of them have originated in one (or several) figures of speech. Namely:

7.1. Circumlocution [*Economic with words* for "liar"; *negative increase* for "losses"; or *home helper/assistant* for "servant"].

7.2. Hyperbole [*He has one love in every harbour* for "He is promiscuous/a whoremonger/a womaniser"].

7.3. Metonymy/synecdoche [*Peter/peter* for "penis" (*OED*); *red-light* for "brothel"; *willie/willy* for "penis" (*OED*)].

7.4. Metaphor [*Cunny* for "cunt" or *muff* for "female genitals" or "whore" (*OED*)].

7.5. Antonomasia [*Quixote* for "dreamer" or "visionary"; *Tartarin* for "boaster" or "braggart" (*OED*)].

7.6. Irony [Spanish *No (muy) católico/católica* for "ill", "fool", or "mad"].

7.7. Meiosis [*Little intoxicated* for "drunk"].

7.8. Alliteration [Shakespeare *Merry Wives* IV i 42–47, used *focative case* for "fuck"].

Thesis No 8

8. Analysing how and why euphemisms are created and used allows us to uncover at least one aspect of how a speaker's imagination works in social context and to gain insights into the cultural consciousness of language users.

8.1. The use of euphemisms helps to maintain a language alive and to adapt to differing social and historical circumstances.

8.2. As fruits of speakers' imagination, euphemisms are *a priori* unpredictable and can vary from one (natural) language to another.

8.3. This unpredictability and variability accounts for the fact that a given word can be used euphemistically in one language while it cannot be used euphemistically in another.

8.3.1. The Spanish equivalent for the euphemistic meaning of *dish* (*OED*) would be meaningless; in order to refer to *dish* euphemistically Spaniards use the circumlocution *está de toma pan y moja*, for instance (Engstrom submitted).

8.3.2. The same is the case for different dialects of a single language (Allan and Burridge 1991:90) [*Tortillera* (literally "female omelette maker") is a term of abuse for "lesbian" in Spain; by contrast it means "female tortilla maker" in Mexico and it is not a taboo term at all].

8.4. Euphemisms are embedded in a cultural tradition shared by the speakers of a single language or the speakers of two (or more) given languages.

8.5. If this cultural tradition is not shared, misunderstandings arise.

8.6. Many false friends arise from the fact that a given word is used euphemistically in one language while it is not used euphemistically in another language (Chamizo Domínguez and Nerlich 2002).

Thesis No 9

9. Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must make a euphemism (Wittgenstein 1961[1922], sect. 7).

III. Conclusion

Euphemisms and dysphemisms share many linguistic and cognitive features with metaphors, but they serve different social and cognitive functions

in discourse. Their study should be an integral part of cognitive linguistics and discourse analysis.

IV. References

Allan, K. 2001. *Natural Language Semantics*. Oxford-Malden: Blackwell.

Allan, K. and K. Burridge. 1991. *Euphemism and Dysphemism, Language Used as Shield and Weapon*. Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press.

Bolinger, D. 1982. *Language, the Loaded Weapon: the Use and Abuse of Language Today*. London: Longman.

Casas Gómez, M. 1986. *La interdicción lingüística. Mecanismos del eufemismo y disfemismo*. Cádiz: Universidad de Cádiz.

Chamizo Domínguez, P. J. and B. Nerlich. 2002. "False Friends: their origin and semantics in some selected languages", *Journal of Pragmatics*. 34. 1833–1849.

Chamizo Domínguez, P.J. and F. Sánchez Benedito. 1994. "Euphemism and dysphemism: Ambiguity and supposition", *Language and Discourse*. 2. 78–92.

Chamizo Domínguez, P.J. and F. Sánchez Benedito. 2000. *Lo que nunca se aprendió en clase: eufemismos y disfemismos en el lenguaje erótico inglés*. Granada: Comares. Foreword by Keith Allan.

Daninos, P. 1990. *Les carnets du major W. Marmaduke Thompson. Découverte de la France et des Français*. Paris: Hachette, 39th [1954].

Engstrom, A. submitted. "Translating literary metaphor", *Target*.

Grice, P.H. 1989. "Logic and Conversation" [in:] *Studies in the Way of Words*. Cambridge [Mass.]/London: Harvard University Press.

Kleparski, G.A. 1997. *Theory and Practice of Historical Semantics: The case of Middle English and Early Modern English Synonyms of GIRL/YOUNG WOMAN*. Lublin: Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski/The University Press of the Catholic University of Lublin.

Kröll, H. 1984. *O eufemismo e o disfemismo no português moderno*. Lisbon: Instituto de Cultura e Língua Portuguesa.

Kruck, W.E. 1981. *Looking for Dr. Condom*. Alabama: University of Alabama.

Lakoff, G. and M. Johnson. 1980. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

McDonald, J. 1988. *A Dictionary of Obscenity, Taboo and Euphemism*. London: Sphere Books.

Mitchell, B. 2001. 15th July. "The corrosive power of euphemisms", *The Washington Times*.

Nerlich, B. and P.J. Chamizo Domínguez. 1999. "Cómo hacer cosas con palabras polisémicas: El uso de la ambigüedad en el lenguaje ordinario", *Contrastes*. 4. 77–96.

Nerlich, B. and D. Clarke. 2001. "Ambiguities we live by: Towards a pragmatic of polysemy", *Journal of Pragmatics*. 33. 1–20.

OED. 1989. *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Ed. by J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2nd edition.

Pfaff, K.L., R.W. Gibbs and M.D. Johnson. 1997. "Metaphor in using and understanding euphemism and dysphemism", *Applied Psycholinguistics*. 18. 59–83.

Sagarin, E. 1968. *The Anatomy of Dirty Words*. New York: Lyle Stuart.

Wittgenstein, L. 1961. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Translated by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. (First published 1922).