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Introduction to the definition of euphemism

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Introduction to the definition of euphemism

1. Introduction

The article focuses on the issues related to defining the phenomenon of euphemizing by Polish and English/American dictionaries. As for the method of excerption, it has been designed to prevent a directed choice of the dictionaries under study, so as to analyse the widest spectrum of the definitions available for the entry “euphemism”. It has been assumed that comparing minimum twenty entries excerpted from different dictionary or encyclopaedic sources should provide an objective analysis of how euphemisms are defined. The assumption has been defended by the result of the study, namely, the similar characteristics taken into consideration by the wide range of dictionaries while defining euphemisms.

2. The traditional definition of euphemism in Polish sources

As for the Polish view on euphemism, ten definitions¹ of euphemism have been analysed. The phenomenon is defined as: a word or an expression, a figure of speech, a linguistic substitution (word, expression, phrase). It is used: as a substitution or to substitute, to soften/ease, to avoid, instead of a proper expression. The words or expressions which need a substitution, softening or avoiding are: vulgar, offensive, drastic, annoying, too direct, embarrassing. The words which are used as a substitution are milder and/or less offensive. Eight definitions introduce the element of evaluation since all the adjectives describing the *verbum proprium* have negative connotations, hence – although it is not clearly stated by the definitions – euphemism is perceived as a positive phenomenon which conveys an appreciative attitude.

¹ The list of dictionaries under study provided in the bibliography.

Taking into consideration the most popular characteristics accounted for by the majority of definitions included in Polish dictionaries, the following, preliminary definition could be formulated: euphemism is a linguistic substitution (word, expression, phrase, figure of speech) used in order to soften or to avoid a proper expression which is thought to be vulgar, offensive, drastic, annoying, too direct or embarrassing. What the above definition provides is: (i) what euphemism is (a linguistic substitution), (ii) its aim (to substitute, to soften or to avoid a proper expression), (iii) adjectives (e.g. vulgar, offensive, etc.) which usually convey negative attitude towards proper expressions that need a substitution. However, out of ten definitions studied, only three definitions explain the reasons for introducing euphemism into language paying attention to linguistic taboo, aesthetics, censorship and convention. It is of great importance since the extralinguistic reasons for euphemism usage are taken into consideration enriching the previous definitions with the elements of context. Purely linguistic definitions which disregard contextual reasons are adequate, however not exhaustive enough, as they do not fully explain the phenomenon of euphemizing. Taking into account features included in the preliminary definition and all extralinguistic factors, a more satisfactory definition can be formulated: euphemism is a linguistic substitution (word, expression, phrase, figure of speech) introduced due to extralinguistic reasons (linguistic taboo, aesthetics, censorship, convention, etc.), used in order to soften or to avoid a proper expression which is thought to be inappropriate for any reason.

After analysing the definitions from the perspective of perceiving euphemism in the course of time (studied dictionaries are published between 1960 and 2009), undoubtedly, comparable characteristics are incorporated. However, out of the collected definitions only two sources pay attention to linguistic taboo – as early as in 1968 (*Słownik terminologii językoznawczej* [Dictionary of linguistic terms]²) and in 1978 (*Encyklopedia wiedzy o języku polskim* [Encyclopaedia of knowledge on the Polish language]). Aesthetics, censorship and convention are mentioned as incentives for euphemism formation in 2009 (*Słownik terminów literackich* [The dictionary of literary terms]). Having studied the definitions the question may arise: if extralinguistic factors are recognized and mentioned as early as in 1968, why are they omitted in other sources published afterwards?

In my opinion, extralinguistic elements are the main force lying behind introducing euphemism into language, and the definitions which either disregard on purpose or neglect this point do not describe the phenomenon as precisely as the three definitions included in: *Słownik terminologii językoznawczej* [Dictionary of linguistic terms] (1968); *Encyklopedia wiedzy o języku polskim* [Encyclopaedia of knowledge on the Polish language] (1978); *Słownik terminów literackich* [The dictionary of literary terms] (2009), which recognize the immense significance of extralinguistic reasons for the introduction of euphemisms.

Out of the studied definitions only three sources provide the examples of euphemisms. According to *Słownik terminologii medialnej* [The Dictionary of Media Terminology] (2006) “(...) instead of stupid we say silly, instead of to lie – to be wrong, instead of misfortune – problem”. Due to *Słownik terminów literackich* [The dictionary of literary

² Translation of the titles of the Polish sources provided by Anna Poniewierska.

terms] (2009) it is “to be wrong instead of to lie, silly instead of stupid.” *Leksykon nauki o języku* [Thesaurus of linguistic knowledge] (2002) among other examples provides euphemisms such as: “to be wrong”, “to borrow”, “four letters”.

3. The traditional definition of euphemism in English/American sources

The study of the definitions included in English/American dictionaries³ consists of analysing eighteen entries offered in the sources published from 1961 to 2009. Euphemism is perceived as: a substitution, a word, a phrase, an expression, a term or a figure of speech. It is used to avoid, to substitute, to make something seem more acceptable. Verbum proprium which needs replacing is unpleasant, painful, frightening, harsh, blunt, (too) direct, offensive, embarrassing and/or upsetting. Expressions used as a substitution are polite, tactful, mild, vague, roundabout, indirect, agreeable, inoffensive, more pleasant, less direct, less explicit, of comparatively favourable implications, of less unpleasant association, considered less distasteful.

As for the extralinguistic factors, Webster’s Third New International dictionary (1961) introduces the idea of avoiding “the direct naming of an unpleasant, painful, or frightening reality”. Online Etymology Dictionary connects euphemizing with “avoidance of words of ill-omen during religious ceremonies”. Wikipedia describes it as “a substitution of a description of something or someone rather than the name, to avoid revealing secret, holy, or sacred names to the uninitiated (...)”. Apart from refraining from words of ill-omen and taking into consideration linguistic taboo, the definitions provide even more important aspect, namely avoiding the direct naming of that what may be described as a “negative” reality. Hence, it is not about the substitution of a word for a word – it is a situation where a word substitutes a given reality. It is of great importance since it shows a direction towards a cognitive approach of the phenomenon where euphemism is not treated as a purely linguistic substitution. It goes a step further taking into consideration taboo and context.

Another important element introduced in some of the definitions, which is also present in Polish sources, is an element of objectivity. Namely, the fact that verbum proprium is not necessarily offensive but it is “considered offensive or upsetting” (*Collins Essential English Dictionary*, 2006); it is not harsh, blunt, but it is “considered harsh, blunt” (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 2004); it is not unpleasant, it is “thought to be unpleasant” (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 1987; *Dictionary of English Language and Culture*, 1993). The point I make is that what is unpleasant for one person does not have to be such for another. What is seen as a euphemism by one speaker does not have to be perceived in the same way by another one. In other words extralinguistic elements (linguistic taboo or what is even more significant, taboo present in reality) and the element of evaluation and subjectivity, when it is not clearly stated

³ The list of dictionaries under study provided in the bibliography.

what words are offensive or harsh, are of great importance for the decision to euphemize. The speaker has to decide what is considered or what is thought of as too direct or blunt. The same word used by different people in different context may be considered either as too direct or as a euphemism. Clearly, the decision whether to euphemize depends on a subjective judgement of the speaker/hearer. The two defining expressions “considered” and “thought of as” make the definitions more general and because of them the term “euphemism” is clearly more difficult to define. On the other hand, the definitions introducing the element of subjectivity take into account an extremely important feature while defining the phenomenon.

Taking into consideration features present in English/American definitions of euphemism, it can be characterized as: a linguistic substitution introduced due to extralinguistic reasons used in order to make a proper expression seem more acceptable or to avoid naming a reality which is thought to be of comparatively unfavourable implications.

Taking into account the definitions of euphemism postulated in the course of time, similar features are included. The purpose such as avoiding “the direct naming of an unpleasant, painful, or frightening reality” is introduced as early as in 1961 (*Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*). Extralinguistic elements are also included in Wikipedia, which defines euphemism as “a substitution of a description of something or someone rather than the name, to avoid revealing secret, holy, or sacred names to the uninitiated, or to obscure the identity of the subject of a conversation from potential eavesdroppers.” Other definitions do not make reference to extralinguistic elements. The question which may be put forward is: why are the extralinguistic elements omitted in other definitions under discussion? Apparently, they are not considered important enough as major defining features, otherwise they should be included.

As for the examples of euphemisms “pass away” is introduced as a euphemism for “die” by *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1987), *Dictionary of English Language and Culture* (1993), *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* (2005), *Oxford Wordpower* (2007), *Dictionary.com Unabridged* (2009); “touched for mad” is provided by *The Pocket Oxford Dictionary* (1991); “pass water” as a euphemism for “urinate” by *Oxford Wordpower* (1998); “slumber room” which “abound in the funeral business” by *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (2004); “user fees” as “a politician’s euphemism for “taxes” by *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* (2005). *The American Heritage New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* (2005) introduces “(...) “rest room” for “toilet”, “lady of the evening” for “prostitute.” The dictionary also points to the fact that: “The Nazis used euphemism in referring to their plan to murder the world’s Jews as “the Final Solution”. There is also an example of “remains” for “corpse” in *Webster’s New World College Dictionary*. The predominant example of a euphemism presented in the dictionaries is “pass away” for “die”.

4. Conclusion

What follows from the above, as far as etymology is concerned, both Polish and English/American definitions, the term euphemism comes from the Greek “eu” (good) and “pheme” (speech or saying), so it means literally “to speak with good words in a pleasant way.”

Recapitulating the above, there are some obvious connections with defining euphemism by Polish and English/American dictionaries. First, in view of the definitions, euphemism is a linguistic substitution. Second, it is used in order to soften, to avoid or to make a proper expression seem more acceptable. Third, *verbum proprium* is thought to be inappropriate. Another point shared by Polish and English/American sources is indicating that a euphemism is introduced due to extralinguistic reasons. However, this feature is present only in a few definitions. As for more similarities between Polish and English sources, it is interesting that both stress that a word substituted designates more precisely what is intended than its euphemised form does and it conveys derogative attitude. *Verbum proprium* has negative connotations either for a speaker or for a listener, and is replaced with a word, an expression or a phrase which has neutral or (more) positive connotations. Both English and Polish have many euphemisms referring to certain areas of life. As for differences, Polish sources provide examples of such euphemism as “silly” for “stupid”, “to be wrong” for “lie”, whereas in English/American sources the most common example is “pass away” for “die”.

Comparing the definitions in regard to the time of formulation shows that similar characteristics are taken into consideration by the sources considered. However, there is one crucial point which is not present in Polish definitions, mainly paying attention to using euphemism in order to “avoid the direct naming of an unpleasant, painful, or frightening reality.” (*Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*, 1961). Polish definitions approach euphemism as substitutions of a word for a word; an expression for an expression. The novel approach where a euphemism replaces not only a word but a given reality is of certain significance since it is a step towards cognitive, more comprehensive approach to the phenomenon.

Although the definitions of euphemism take into consideration similar features, neither the dictionary definitions nor their compilations can suffice as an exhaustive description of the phenomenon. The only characteristic that is straightforward is that euphemism is a substitution. The question that remains to be addressed is the issue of the criteria for using a particular substitution. Motivation connected with the extralinguistic reasons pushing the speaker towards using euphemisms appears to be the key event.

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