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Linguopragmatic Analysis of Euphemisms in Political Discourse

ABSTRACT. *Euphemism as a linguistic and cultural phenomenon has long attracted attention of scholars who studied the lexical unit from the perspective of semantics, psychology, rhetoric, culture and professional discourse. Despite the vast literature on the subject, the semiotic nature of euphemisms hasn't been in the focus of scholarly attention yet. The article proceeds from the assumption that political language is purpose-oriented and politicians carefully choose the vocabulary to prevent unwanted reactions from public. So the presence of euphemisms in the politicians' speech indicates their tentative attention to the issues under discussion which need coding. As a result the more uncomfortable politicians are with a topic, the more euphemisms they construct to get around talking about it in direct terms. Therefore euphemisms function as "secret signs" to convey either purposeful concealment of truth or indicate that the speaker is sensitive to what is communicated. Since these lexical units signal of speaker's attitude to what is spoken about they can be considered as semiotic symbols. The aim of the article is to consider the pragmatic aspect of the use of euphemisms in political discourse. The research methods used in the interpretation of the textual material are descriptive-analytical method, contextual analysis and lexicographic analysis. The study of euphemisms used by politicians of the USA, Great Britain and Russia has allowed the author to identify various ways of euphemization at the lexical and syntactic levels of the language. The article concludes that the semiotic approach to the study of euphemisms helps in revealing the deep meaning of the coded message created by the politician.*

KEYWORDS: *semiotic effect, semantic level, syntactic level, political discourse, politicians, political rhetoric, political speeches, linguopragmatics, euphemisms, speech strategies, manipulative effect, manipulation of consciousness.*

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Лингвопрагматический анализ эвфемизмов в политическом дискурсе

АННОТАЦИЯ. *Эвфемизмы как лингвистический и культурный феномен в течение долгого времени привлекают внимание исследователей, изучающих данную лексическую единицу с точки зрения семантики, психологии, культуры и профессионального дискурса. Несмотря на существующую солидную литературу по данному вопросу, семиотический характер эвфемизмов оставался вне поля зрения. Автор исходит из того, что политические деятели тщательно контролируют собственную речь путем жесткого отбора лексических единиц, чтобы словесное выражение позиции не заостряло существующие противоречия. Следовательно, наличие в речи политиков эвфемизмов указывает на их чувствительное отношение к обсуждаемой теме, которая требует кодировки. И чем жестче требования кодировки, тем вероятнее употребление политиком эвфемизмов. Это наблюдение позволяет говорить о том, что данные лексические единицы выполняют семиотическую функцию и могут выступать как знаки, сигнализирующие о чувствительном отношении политика к определенной теме. Цель статьи заключается в попытке рассмотреть прагматический аспект использования эвфемизмов в политическом дискурсе. Для интерпретации экспериментального материала использовались описательно-аналитический метод, контекстуальный и лексико-графический анализ. Изучение эвфемизмов на материале речей политических деятелей США, Великобритании и России позволило выявить различные способы эвфемизации на лексическом и синтаксических уровнях языка. В статье делается вывод, что семиотический подход к изучению эвфемизмов помогает в раскрытии глубинного смысла закодированного сообщения, создаваемого политическим деятелем.*

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА: *семиотический эффект, семантический уровень, синтаксический уровень, политический дискурс, политические деятели, политическая риторика, политические речи, лингвопрагматика, эвфемизмы, речевые стратегии, манипулятивное воздействие, манипуляция сознанием.*

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INTRODUCTION

The fact that political language is purpose-oriented is taken for granted. It is the nature of politicians to be considerate and tender of peoples' feelings, therefore they make conscious choice of the words employed in their speech to avoid expressions that have unpleasant associations and might be coldly received by citizens. This is the reason why they resort to euphemisms, the connotation-neutral substitute for a distasteful concept, to safely deal with certain embarrassing topics without being politically incorrect or breaking a social convention. Since that political language is characterized by conflict avoidance out of concern for the feelings of the audience, it is my firm belief that the more uncomfortable politicians are with a topic, the more euphemisms they construct to get around talking about it in direct terms.

The investigations of different types of euphemisms as parts of lexical systems of different languages have proved that the process of euphemizing is a complex and many-sided linguistic phenomenon characterized by three interrelated and interconnected aspects: social, psychological [H. Halmari, 2011] and linguistic proper [T. A. Van Dijk, 1993; K. Allen, K. Burridge, 1991]. Of the three aspects the most important is the linguistic one which is connected with meliorative language evaluation of something negative existing in the real world [L. Rosewarne, 2013]. These studies should be supplemented by the investigations devoted to "political correctness" conducted by K. Allan and K. Burridge [1991] and H. Halmari [2011] and investigations in professional political discourse [E. A. Ivanova, M.A. Korchevskaya 2011; A.P. Chudinov, 2012; E.A. Besedina, T.V. Burkova, A.N. Michurin, 2019]. Scholars are unanimous that euphemisms are extralinguistic in their nature [B. Fraser, 2009]. At the same time there is still a great divergence of opinions concerning social [T. A. Van Dijk, 1993] and psychological causes of euphemisms [D. J. Enright, 1985; G. Lakoff, 1993]. However, so far no study has been devoted to the pragmatic processes of a verbal behaviour which politicians employ in the hope of softening the effect of what they really wish to communicate.

Euphemisms certainly are the endless source of language vocabulary, and the number of various scientific approaches in the field and the changes that languages undergo encourage to find new ways to tackle the issue. The purpose of this paper is to gain an insight into the way euphemism is used as semiotic symbol to signal the audience of either purposeful concealment of truth or indecent practices which could cause offence to the target audience or

some third party. The focus of this article attention is on different types of euphemistic strategies of political discourse which are realised at semantic and syntactic levels.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMES

Prior to presenting the analysis of data, it seems necessary to define the concept of euphemism. According to dictionaries, the word "euphemism" comes from Greek "eu" (meaning "good") and "pheme" (meaning "speech" or "saying"), and literally means "to speak with good words" to avoid direct speaking of things different people might find offensive. To illustrate the point consider the following definitions: (1) Euphemizing is generally defined as substituting an inoffensive or pleasant term for a more explicit, offensive one, thereby veneering the truth by using kind words [D. J. Enright, 2007]; (2) Word, etc. used in place of one avoided as e.g. offensive, indecent, or alarming [14]; (3) Word combination used as an alternative to a dispreferred expression, in order to avoid possible loss of face: either one's own face or through giving offences, that of the audience, or of some third party [K. Allen, K. Burridge, 1991].

As an item at a semantic level, on the one hand, euphemism should be distinguished from taboo, and on the other — from political correctness. The main difference between taboos and euphemisms is that former are mainly a historic phenomena which are associated with natural disasters or evil [K. Burridge, 2010] while the latter are occasional connotation-neutral alternatives to unpleasant or dispreferred meanings. Similarly euphemism should be distinguished from political correctness. Political correctness is a term used in various cultures to describe attempts to impose limits on language, terms, and viewpoints in public discussion to avoid potentially offensive terminology [H. Halmari, 2011]. Terms like *industrial alpinism*, *sanitation engineer* are not simply positive expressions for *cleaning windows of tall buildings* and *garbage collector*, but deliberately invented job titles to improve their social status by highlighting certain aspects of these jobs. While political correctness usually refers to a linguistic phenomenon, it is sometimes extended to cover political ideology since the term manifests a type of linguistic behaviour aimed at eliminating social stereotypes existing in society. The euphemistic expressions are of different nature. They are rather instruments of linguistic behavior, a kind of speaker's linguistic tactics at a certain time on a certain occasion with the purpose to elevating the status of something; to prevent speaker from offending people or to avoid getting involved in controversy. Generally speaking, it is one of the useful ways to communicate

things that are socially difficult to express in direct terms.

The analysis of euphemistic strategies — both at semantic and syntactic levels — is embedded in theories which consider euphemism as the linguistic manifestation of social and interpersonal concerns. Within this frame, language is understood both as social practice and as a mode of social action insofar as it is capable to have an impact on how social and political phenomena are perceived and on people's reactions to these phenomena. In this way, language contributes to determining people's speech behavior that is directly influenced by the context in which it is used. It follows that political discourse is a form of political action which exerts social control in the socio-political context and ultimately reproduces and legitimates power through language [T. A. Van Dijk, 1993]. It is also based on a discourse-analytic approach, according to which peculiarities of the linguistic units in political discourse are determined by speaker's (1) intention; (2) system of values; (3) status or position (4) political situation at a certain time; (5) rhetorical strategy to manipulate public opinion [E. I. Sheigal, 2004]. Since figurative language is one of characteristic features of political discourse Conceptual Metaphor Theory, developed by G. Lakoff [G. Lakoff, 1993], will allow for gaining an insight into the way euphemism fulfils its communicative and social goals in a sample of real language use.

2. METHODOLOGY

The language data for this study was excerpted from speeches of the President of Russian Federation Dmitry Medvedev (dates of the presidency are between 2008 and 2012), the Prime Ministers of the United Kingdom Tony Blair (served from 1997 to 2007) and Margaret Thatcher (from 1979 to 1990), President of the USA Barak Obama (served as the 44th president of the United States from 2009 to 2017). The choice of the political discourse is explained by the fact that political language is purpose-oriented. Politicians resort to euphemisms because through using them they control the transmission of information as well as audience's perception of the world. The bulk for empirical data comprises 35 speeches of the politicians published at different times and amounts to a total of 253 lexical units. It contains 78 quotations in which 105 euphemistic items have been encountered.

The research methodology followed corresponds to the adoption of a "bottom-up" approach to explain the linguistic data obtained. Once the cases of euphemisms were found, expressions were classified into different categories of euphemism formation both at **seman-**

tic level (terms, connotation-neutral substitutes, metaphors) based on lexicographic study of the units and at **syntactic level** (passive voice structures, downtones, syntactic constructions overloaded with excessive subordinate clauses). Finally, the pragmatics of linguistic items was analysed to confirm or disprove the hypothesis stated above or reveal other reasons for euphemizing.

It should be made clear from the very outset that the study makes no claim to being complete or exhaustive. The analysis is therefore mainly qualitative than quantitative following the tradition of critical discourse analysts, that usually relies on small data samples [J. Charteris-Black, 2005]. Furthermore, the limitations and scope of the present article do not allow to deal with all examples of euphemism encountered in depth. Yet, there is a hope that the results of the analysis would contribute to the study of euphemistic items and would give those interested in this area some alternative perspective to consider.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As it has been indicated above, euphemism in general, as well as political euphemism in particular, is a context-sensitive phenomenon: a word or expression is not expected to be euphemistic rather, its offensive quality considerably depends on the context in which it is used. Consider the example, which illustrates how the Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher avoids words that may have unpleasant associations.

- (1) *But we are all aware of how **the bitter experience of Vietnam** has changed the public mood in America. We are also aware of the circumstances that inhibit action by an American president in an election year.*

[http://www.emersonkent.com/speeches/britain_awake.htm].

The euphemistic expression **the bitter experience** is of a very broad semantics and can be used in any context indicating anything. Yet on a given occasion the speaker employs it as the alternative for *war* in the hope of softening the effect of what the Prime Minister really wishes to communicate.

3.1 Euphemism at Semantic Level

Semantics, the surface level of language, is where the effects of euphemism are more clearly visible. Word choice turned out to be the most popular source of euphemisms. The analysis has identified four frequently occurring types of euphemizing at this level.

The first one is whereby the unwanted word is substituted by a word with broad connotation-neutral semantics. These lexical units can be used with a variety of words without attracting

the audience's attention. Let us consider the following extract from the Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's speech.

- (2) *Our Anglo-Saxon **heritage** embraces the countries of the Old Commonwealth that have too often been neglected by politicians in this country, but are always close to the hearts of British people. We believe that we should **build on our traditional bonds** with Australia, New Zealand and Canada.*

[http://www.emersonkent.com/speeches/britain_awake.htm]

By using euphemistic items with positive connotations **heritage** meaning “*features belonging to the culture of a particular society, such as traditions, languages, or buildings, that were created in the past and still have historical importance*”

[<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/heritage>] and **bonds** meaning “*a close connection joining two or more people or countries*” [<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/bond>] the politician deliberately avoids words with the meaning “*influence*” or “*to exert country's influence*”. Such a strategy of “de-concretization” allows the speaker to avoid direct nomination of what she really means.

The next example is also borrowed from the speech of the Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher delivered at Kensington Town Hall and is meant to provide evidence for the role ambiguity plays in euphemistic use, since ambiguity is a crucial feature of euphemism especially when its main motivation is to save face.

- (3) *The third reason is even more far-reaching. If the Russians have their way in Angola, they may well conclude that they can **repeat the performance** elsewhere. Similarly, **uncommitted nations** would be left to conclude that NATO is a spent force and that their best policy is to pursue an accommodation with Russia.*

[http://www.emersonkent.com/speeches/britain_awake.htm]

The euphemistic items **repeat the performance** and **uncommitted nations** involving a high degree of abstraction are used by the speaker not so much to avoid being impolite as to lessen the impact on public opinion of the dangerous effects the *Soviet support for the Communist MPLA* in Angola might have on the NATO bloc.

Nowadays migration processes and immigrants' activity are an acute problem in many countries. The examples that follow demonstrate how politicians discuss the issue. The example (4) is borrowed from the speech of the Prime Minister Tony Blair:

- (4) ***Lack of respect**... I've also learnt that the British people are a tolerant and decent people: ... they do believe there are real problems in our immigration and asylum system... Though people like the fact that we've got over the deference of the past, there is a **disrespect** that people don't like.... We've done a lot so far with anti-social behaviour and additional numbers of police, but I want to make this a particular priority for this government — how we **bring back a proper sense of respect** in our schools, in our communities, in our towns, in our villages.*

[<https://keep-tony-blair-for-pm.wordpress.com/blair-speech-transcripts-from-1997-2007>]

Notably that the Prime Minister avoids defining immigrants' behavior as law violation. Instead he uses different combinations with the word *respect*: **lack of respect**, **a disrespect**, **a proper sense of respect**. The reason for this is quite obvious: any law violation involves and entails punishment or, according to PM “*additional numbers of police*”. At the same time any punishment on the government side raises the issue of democracy, hence the phrase with defused semantics “*bring back a proper sense of respect*”.

The next example (5) shows how the very problem is presented in the speech of the President of Russian Federation Dmitry Medvedev:

- (5) ***Расширяется**, к сожалению, **география межэтнической напряжённости**... Все должны соблюдать закон, **нормы** элементарного **приличия**. **Следует с уважением** относиться к обычаям других людей. Тот, кто, прибывая на новое место, **ведёт себя неподобающим образом** или, тем более, совершает преступление — должен быть наказан.*

[<http://www.rg.ru/2011/09/08/medvedev-forum.html>]

*(Unfortunately, **interethnic tension is spreading to more and more places**. ... Everyone must certainly adhere to the law, the basic **norms of behaviour**, and **be respectful** of other people's customs. Anyone who commits a crime or does not adhere to these principles when moving to a new location must be punished. The same applies to those who infringe on the rights of minorities).*

[<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/8887>]

It can easily be seen that the speaker does not mention the precise scope of national conflicts, instead he uses euphemistic expressions **расширяется география межэтнической**

напряжённости (tension is spreading to more and more places) with very vague and obscure semantics. While the speeches of Tony Blair and Dmitry Medvedev vary in their content, they both employ practically the same euphemistic constructions with words *behaviour* and *respect*. The use of the words with obviously more positive connotations than *law violations* leaves a room open for a more favourable interpretation of the distasteful topic they deal with.

The example below (6) shows how the usage of the word with positive connotation can turn negative utterance into neutral. In her speech to Finchley Conservatives the Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher criticising the policy of the Conservative party opponents, avoids to state that the latter are against reduction of budget for social and public services. Instead she uses adjective **cautious** meaning “careful, well considered to avoid risks” [<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/cautious/>]:

- (6) *The Socialists, in fact, seem to regard defense as almost infinitely cuttable. They are **much more cautious** when it comes to cutting other types of public expenditure.*

[<https://matiane.wordpress.com/2011/11/20/margaret-thatchers-iron-lady-speech/>]

In this example, however, the reason for the euphemistic alternative is not to evade or conceal the truth, the intention of the speaker is by criticising political opponents to advocate and promote the budget increase for military purposes.

In economic realm euphemisms are used to make unpleasant facts appear attractive. The case in point is the next example (7):

- (7) **Progressive economic stratification**, which may have been less evident in the period of economic growth, has lead to acute conflicts between the rich and the poor during the downturn. [<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/8887>]

As it can be seen the economic term **economic stratification** is accompanied by the adjective **progressive** meaning “in favour of new ideas, modern methods and change” [https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/progressive_1]. In this way the speaker by minimizing the adverse effects of economic reforms creates an image of positive economic policy results, which can be considered as a device to resort to when speaker implies more than he actually says.

Terms typically remain the endless source of political euphemism. People dislike changes, as more often than not they are associated with challenges. The changes at national and inter-

national levels, changes in economic or social life favour the invention of euphemistic expressions whose aim is to alleviate the difficult economic or political conditions. For instance, politicians prefer to speak of *investments* rather than *government spending*; to use the word combination *price liberalisation* to substitute *price increase*; *revenue enhancement* as the alternative to *tax increases*; *stratification* instead of *division or segmentation*. Since the audience is not always aware of the exact meaning of the terms used it can hardly adequately decode the main idea of a message communicated. Thus, these words and phrases can safely be used as a verbal camouflage to avoid protests or opposition in the country or region. The following extract from Dmitry Medvedev's speech abounds with terms such as **economic reforms stratification, living standards, income, decile ratio, xenophobia**.

- (8) *Ситуация в России усугубляется ещё и тем, что, как и в большинстве стран, которые в прошлом веке прошли через масштабные преобразования, через экономические реформы, у нас произошло чрезмерное расслоение граждан по уровню жизни: 10 процентов самых обеспеченных россиян получают доход в 15 раз больше, чем 10 процентов самых бедных. Это всем известный так называемый децильный коэффициент. Именно среди неблагоприятных групп населения быстрее всего, как, собственно, и во всём мире, распространяются ксенофобия и нетерпимость.* [<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/8887>]

(The situation in Russia is also compounded by the fact that, as in most nations that went through major transformations during the last century, we have had excessive stratification of population with regard to living standards: the top ten percent receive an income 15 times greater than the bottom ten percent. This is the well-known so-called decile ratio. In particular, xenophobia and intolerance are spreading most rapidly among the poorest social groups — same as in the rest of the world).

Obviously, the politician neither “intends to harm” the audience through the use of terms nor purposefully conceal the truth, therefore these lexical unit can hardly be referred to euphemisms. The politician resorts to the terms because he wants to avoid disapproval from the audience as well as avoid admitting any kind of fault in economic policy. It seems that two phrases **as in most nations that went through**

major transformations and *same as in the rest of the world* support the idea that politician wants to prevent any blame being laid on the political party. It follows then, that implication is an important function of euphemisms in addition to their signified functions.

Another group of lexical units embraces euphemistic expressions that have their roots in metaphors. Semantic ambiguity of euphemism and two-dimensional nature of metaphor provide opportunity for euphemising. In the examples (9) and (10) the expression **vulnerable segments** implies *children, pregnant women, the elderly and the sick*:

(9) *It is sometimes claimed that while harm to the economy is intended by economic sanctions, no harm is intended to the vulnerable segments of that population.*

[<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/333825998>]

(10) *We are willing to look out for another vulnerable segments and help people who are down on their luck.*

[<http://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/10/politics/transcript-obama-syria-isis-speech/>]

The words **vulnerable**, meaning “able to be easily physically or mentally hurt, influenced, or attacked” [<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/vulnerable>] and **segment** “one of the smaller groups or parts” [<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/segment>] sound neutral and do not express anything specific. This artificially coined word combination is used to divert away audience’s attention from the fact that less protected population groups will be affected by economic reforms.

In the following extract from Barack Obama’s speech the phrase **worst setback** is euphemistic substitute of the word combination *financial crises*, which USA suffered in 2008.

(11) *My fellow Americans, we live in a time of great change. Next week marks 6 years since our economy suffered its worst setback since the Great Depression.*

[<http://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/10/politics/transcript-obama-syria-isis-speech/>]

It is evident that President Obama’s use of the word **setback** meaning “something that causes delay or stops progress” is deliberate because the idea of crisis can be scary for some people.

When politicians want to disguise their true intentions, the use of euphemisms can become manipulative to garner support for the agenda to which society is deeply hostile or to change the appearance of “topic that evokes negative emotions”. The case in point would be the intentionally bloodless word combination **ethnic cleansing**. According to Cambridge and Oxford

Dictionaries noun *cleansing* is a derivative from the verb *to clean* with the meaning “of instance of cleaning something, esp. its surface”. However the Dictionaries do not lists *killing* among the possible meaning of the word *cleansing*. It follows therefore that the point of the word combination *ethnic cleansing* is to distance from the horror that actually happens during the conflict: the killing and wounding of non-combatants. The euphemistic alternative for inhuman acts makes them look civilised and conceal brutal reality.

At the same time the language system is constantly evolving which leads to lexicalisation of concepts. Even though there is no relation between linguistic signs and their signified, people start to relate euphemism to its signified after it has been used for a certain time. Consequently, the former sense of distance and vagueness of the notion fades away as well as its euphemistic coloring. According to K. Burridge [Burridge, 2004], “euphemisms contribute to the development and enriching of English language by a new expressions, because they are based on associations and associations still change”. Moreover some of the alternative synonyms are used so often that their euphemistic origin becomes unnoticeable. The case in point is *ethnic cleansing* which is no wonder has become an integral part of the word stock of many Dictionaries nowadays.

To further explore the transformation of the concept in question, consider the definition of the notion provided by different dictionaries. Thus, according to .britannica.com, *ethnic cleansing* is “the attempt to create ethnically homogeneous geographic areas through the deportation or forcible displacement of persons belonging to particular ethnic groups. Ethnic cleansing sometimes involves the removal of all physical vestiges of the targeted group through the destruction of monuments, cemeteries, and houses of worship”. [<https://www.britannica.com/topic/ethnic-cleansing>]. Collins English Dictionary provides the following explanation: “1. *ethnic cleansing* is the process of using violent methods to force certain groups of people out of a particular area or country; 2. if armed forces cleanse an area, they use violent methods to force certain groups of people to leave it and go to live elsewhere. You can also say that people are cleansed from an area”. [<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/cleanse>]. It is remarkable that MacMillan Dictionary considers **ethnic cleansing** and **social cleansing** as synonyms and defines the phenomenon as “a process of forcing groups of people who are regarded as not desirable to leave an area, in some extreme cases by killing them” [<https://www.macmillandictionary.com/us/dictionary/am>

erican/social-cleansing]. In other words the more euphemistic phrases are used the more accepted they become and fewer people question their true origin and meaning in the course of time.

Things like ill political decisions, or mistakes in economic policy can indeed be defended and explained to the audience, yet, only by arguments which sometimes are too brutal for most people to face. Therefore politicians deliberately resort to the euphemistic vocabulary to replace those unpleasant meanings, since the reduced state of audience's consciousness is favorable to political conformity. This applies to euphemisms which are directly or indirectly related to warfare, that became the most topical and controversial issue of the 21st century. Many politicians favor "special" words to describe the war on terror. As a result, units with diffuse semantics and vague phrases like *overseas contingency operations*, *to counter violent extremism* or *kinetic military action* have entered the political lexicon. In his public statements on the U.S. war against Islamic State (ISIS) the President Barak Obama tried to avoid using word "war" to describe U.S. actions in Iraq and Syria. Instead he uses substitutes **combat mission, comprehensive and sustained strategy, campaign**. Consider the examples that follow:

- (12) *We've done so while bringing more than 140,000 American troops home from Iraq, and drawing down our forces in Afghanistan, where **our combat mission** will end later this year. Thanks to our military and counterterrorism professionals, America is safer.*

[<http://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/10/politics/transcript-obama-syria-isis-speech/>]

- (13) *Our objective is clear: we will degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a **comprehensive and sustained counter-terrorism strategy**.*

[<http://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/10/politics/transcript-obama-syria-isis-speech/>]

- (14) ***This counter-terrorism campaign** will be waged through a steady, relentless effort to take out ISIL wherever they exist, using our air power and our support for partner forces on the ground. ... And it is America that is helping Muslim communities around the world not just in the fight against terrorism, but in the fight for opportunity, tolerance, and a more hopeful future.*

[<http://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/10/politics/transcript-obama-syria-isis-speech/>]

In doing so the President intends to soften the possible negative impact of the speech and evade an offensive effect in sensitive topics. He also wants the average citizen believe that the

country is in the right and continue to support the war. Viewed from this angle euphemistic expressions in political discourse become a tool of mind and social control. By means of euphemism, politicians can easily escape from embarrassing topics by misleading the public. It can be concluded that the more uncomfortable politician is with a topic, the more euphemisms s/he constructs to get around talking about it in direct terms. And vice versa the number of euphemisms in politician's speech clearly demonstrates the speaker's sensitivity to a topic and the fact that this sensitivity should be encoded.

3.2 Euphemism at Syntactic Level

Apart from word choice, syntactic constructions significantly contribute to the politicians' intended euphemistic effect as they represent a real problem for decoding and interpretation.

The analysis revealed that common strategy politicians adhere to is the choice of the passive construction whereby the agent is unknown. By doing so politicians distance themselves from the action or evade direct responsibility.

- (15) *The electoral threshold for parties to be accepted into the State Duma **has been reduced**.* [<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/8887>]

It is not obvious from this example who actually reduced the electoral threshold for political parties, therefore no one can be held responsible. Thus, the passive voice is used to hide responsibility for deeds.

The same happens in examples (16), (17) and (18) in which the Prime Minister Tony Blair resorts to the passive voice instead of using active verbal constructions, which would have perhaps associated him with the international policy of UK and its allies.

- (16) *Many of our domestic problems **are caused on the other side of the world**.*

- (17) *Instead of enjoying its oil wealth Iraq **has been reduced to poverty**, with political life stultified through fear.*

- (18) *But I am sure Britain's and Europe's long-term interests in Africa **are best served**, if we intervene, not excessively, but to do what we can to save African nations from barbarism and dictatorship and be proud of it.*

[<https://keptonyblairforpm.wordpress.com/blair-speech-transcripts-from-1997-2007/>]

The next group of examples illustrates the use of downtoners in the political discourse. This device is used to lessen the impact of unpleasant topics on the audience and thus, softens the contents of what politicians really mean.

- (19) *But we must also heed the warnings of those, like Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who*

remind us that we have been fighting a kind of Third World War over the entire period since 1945, and that we have been steadily losing ground.

[<https://matiane.wordpress.com/2011/11/20/margaret-thatchers-iron-lady-speech/>]

(20) *We have a difficult year ahead in 1976. I hope it will not result in a further decline of Western power and influence of the kind that we saw in 1975.*

[<https://matiane.wordpress.com/2011/11/20/margaret-thatchers-iron-lady-speech/>]

(21) *We are parodied as either being Mrs. Thatcher with a smile instead of a handbag; or as a sort of really old-style socialists in drag, desperate to conceal our true identity. In reality, we are neither.*

[<https://keptonyblairforpm.wordpress.com/blair-speech-transcripts-from-1997-2007/>]

As can be seen by scaling down the negative effect of the particular item they modify e.g. “Third World War”, “that we saw in 1975”, and “really old-style socialists” downtoners **a kind of** and **a sort of** introduce an element of intentional vagueness and semantic indeterminacy which facilitates mitigation when applied to political discourse.

In the next example (22) taken literally, Dmitry Medvedev’s statement means that stagnation of the Western economies has a detrimental impact on the national economies:

(22) *Clearly, the declining growth rates of the Western economies are affecting the majority of countries by narrowing their export opportunities, complicating access to loans and increasing uncertainty in the financial and stock markets.*

[<https://russialist.org/transcript-a-panel-discussion-on-the-g20-in-davos-dmitry-medvedevs-speech-at-the-discussion/>]

It follows from the example that Dmitry Medvedev’s use of oxymoron **the declining growth rate**, continuous tense **are affecting**, the prepositional phrases with gerund as an adverbial modifier of manner, combination of words with defused semantics e.g. **increasing uncertainty, narrow export opportunities** quickly blurs the real state of world economy. One may suggest that the number of economic terms might force the audience to read into it in order to learn more, which the speaker expects most people will not do.

Consider another extract borrowed from the President Obama’s speech on Combating ISIS and Terrorism:

(23) *“... the American people understand that defending democracy and liberty is never without cost. Tonight, I again call*

on Congress to give us additional authorities and resources to train and equip these fighters”

[<http://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/10/politics/transcript-obama-syria-isis-speech/>]

Obviously by **additional authorities and resources to train and equip fighters** the President means funding the war against ISIL. Barack Obama resorts to the syntactic euphemism to obscure an issue to which the American citizens might be deeply hostile. Yet, what is notable is the first sentence in the extract. The President sounds as if he has already got the approval of the Americans.

The last but not the least example worth considering along these lines is the one borrowed from the Prime Minister Tony Blair’s Inaugural speech:

(24) *Secondly, in relation to the public services — health and education — again people like the investment that has gone in to public services — they welcome it. I found absolutely no support for any suggestion we cut back on that investment. But people want...higher standards both of care and of education for the investment we’re putting in. I know that Iraq has been a deeply divisive issue in this country. And so we will focus on delivering not just the investment but the reform and change in those public services.*

What is remarkable in the extract is the phrase **I found absolutely no support for any suggestion we cut back on that investment**. It is not quite clear if the government is about to cut on investment or much will depend on the circumstances. Then all of a sudden the speaker mentions Iraq, “I know that Iraq has been a deeply divisive issue in this country”. It’s quite surprising that in the context of budget the PM mentions the international conflict. It can be considered as a deliberate tactics to refocus the audience’s attention. Yet the final sentence starts with the conjunctions “and so” which traditionally signal conclusion, which in this context runs like “...we will focus on delivering not just the investment, but the reform and change in those public services”, What deduction can be made? Probably the real intention of the government is through reforms to cut the investments meant for social sphere and use them for military purposes.

The usage of complex syntactic constructions and phrases that contribute to ambiguity of what is uttered makes it possible to consider lexical units at syntactic level in a class of its own. Since they allow speakers to hide the unpleasant reality by using overloaded syntax to avoid direct nomination of what is spoken about

they can be referred to the group of units with the dominant function of euphemization.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The study was aimed at examining the functions and the purposes of the use of euphemisms employed by politicians in their speeches. In order to achieve this aim, the linguistic items were analysed at semantic and syntactic levels in terms of the intentions underlying their function in political discourse.

The study revealed that euphemisms are extralinguistic in their nature and politicians resort to a wide range of euphemistic devices as a face-saving strategy to cover-up distasteful realities. Though the function and effect of euphemisms comes to a greater prominence at semantic level, these items cannot be regarded exclusively as a lexical process. They also operate at syntactic level through a set of discursive tactics of verbal behaviour.

The analysis also reveals that these twofold lexical items function as "secret signs" or symbols to signal of either purposeful concealment of truth or improper practices which could cause offence to the audience or to some third party. Therefore, these lexical units can be considered as semiotic symbols that convey to the listener speakers' attitude to what is spoken about. Thus, approaching euphemisms from semiotic angle could make us more knowledgeable about the pragmatics of this phenomenon and better prepared to understand the invisible and hidden meaning behind the message which politicians try to communicate.

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