

The Abuse of Words: the Case of Euphemism

Alessandro Prato

Department of Political and Cognitive Social Sciences (DISPOC)
University of Siena - Italy

Abstract

The paper aims to investigate the use of euphemism in the political communication as one of the most interesting strategies used to influence the behaviour of people and direct the formation of opinions in accordance with guidelines functional to systems of power. Euphemism is a figure of speech in which an appropriate expression is replaced with words or phrases that have a weaker meaning, so as to soften or conceal its excessive violence or crudeness for the sake of social expediency, or for religious, moral or even political concerns. This figure is based on the evocative power of words which leads people to believe in the representation of reality developed by the orator, even when it is not based on verisimilitude. In this way the description of reality is often misleading and untruthful. To identify and expose these strategies of misleading manipulation is one of the crucial tasks of critical thought today. On it hinges the possibility for citizens to be more than just passive spectators of the spectacle of communication and defenceless targets of propaganda techniques.

Keywords: manipulation, propaganda, euphemism, political communication, rhetoric

1. The power of words is a topic which rhetoric has explored from its inception, ever since one of its founders, Gorgias of Leontinoi (c. 485-375 BC), broadened the discipline's field of enquiry by considering both the strictly juridical sphere and that of literary speeches such as eulogies and panegyrics. Gorgias displayed a particular talent precisely in relation to this type of speech. He is the only sophist whose works partially survive, the most famous and widely discussed being the *Encomium of Helen*. This work amounts to a demonstration of the power of the spoken word, which – when appropriately used – is capable of reversing people's beliefs to suit one's desires because, even though it is a small and utterly invisible thing; it is capable of suppressing fear and assuaging pain, of causing merriment and increasing compassion (Consigny 2001).

The efficacy of speech, therefore, derives from the evocative power of words, which leads people to believe in the representation of reality developed by the orator, even when it is not based on verisimilitude. This capacity to exploit appearances for the sake of persuasion was stigmatised by Plato, who accused Gorgias and the other sophists of manipulating – in the negative sense of the term – the public by having them believe what they, the orators, wanted them to believe: by making petty things seem great, and great things petty; by making new things seem ancient, and ancient things new.

In the *Encomium of Helen*, Gorgias analyses the process of persuasion, which is actually a focus of interest for all classic rhetoric authors, from Aristotle to Perelman. Persuasion is the phenomenon whereby, through the skilled use of words and without any coercion, people are induced in some cases to support an opinion or adopt a certain behaviour that was previously foreign to them, and in other cases to change their opinion or behaviour. In other words, the case of Helen and Paris serves as a pretext for a more general reflection on persuasion, which carries the same power as necessity even though it does not actually coincide with it. Indeed, a speech capable of persuading a soul forces her both to trust what is being said and to agree in practice, because persuasion, when combined with words, moulds the soul by giving the desired direction.

2. Systems of power have always been aware of this persuasive force of words and have sought to control its use and distribution via the media, so as to channel opinions and orient them in the desired direction (Hillman 1995). By playing with words, it is possible to manipulate facts and, ultimately, collective memory as a whole. This is the case with the abuse of power, which in his *Essay on Human Understanding* (1690) Locke regards as a phenomenon of the utmost interest, so much so that Chapter 10 of Book 3 is entirely devoted to the subject.

At the beginning of his exposition a distinction is drawn between the concept of imperfection and that of abuse. Whereas imperfections in words are connate to their genesis, and essentially derive from the excessive complexity of ideas and from their uncertain referents, abuse is a wilful misunderstanding of language which manifests itself in cases of deliberate obscurity and ambiguity in the use of words.

So, on the one hand, Locke acknowledges the great advantage provided by the use of names, which is to say the possibility of fixing general ideas in such a way that without external material signs nominal essences would dissolve and communication could never take place (Formigari 2004: 188-220); but, on the other hand, Locke also takes account of the drawbacks and dangers that the use of names entails, insofar as names tend to replace ideas and are often employed without really knowing their meaning (Locke 1690: III/X, 32 and XI/8).¹ The negative consequences of abuse in communication are obvious, as language is the great channel by which men communicate with one another to share discoveries, thoughts, and knowledge: someone who misuses language destroys or obstructs the channels by which information is conveyed and shared by public opinion (Locke 1690: III/XI, 5).

Abuse ought to be limited and controlled through a critical use of language that entails definitions and examples, or through a way of using terms that consistently preserves their meaning. However, Locke is also fully aware of the fact that the phenomenon of abuse cannot be entirely eliminated, because to require men to use words always in the same sense – rather than to express ideas that are not well defined and uniform – is to expect all men to have the same notions and to speak only of things about which they have clear and well-defined ideas (Locke 1690: III/XI, 2).

The question raised by Locke directly concerns us, given that to this day journalistic discourse presents ambiguities and misuses when it comes to words. In many cases it effectively becomes hostage to the language of power, to the point that this style of communication increasingly resembles that of the authorities, while editorials, in the press as much as on television, often come across as political addresses (Pratkanis – Aronson 1996).

3. In this article I will focus on some particularly significant examples pertaining to the technique of euphemism. If we were to try and provide a clear definition of euphemism, we might say that it is a figure of speech in which an appropriate expression is replaced with words or phrases that have a weaker meaning, so as to soften or conceal its excessive violence or crudeness for the sake of social expediency, or for religious, moral or even political concerns. Or we might say that it consists in changing a given word, particularly when the word in question is a term related to religion or morals, in order to make it less immediately recognisable and exposed to censorship (Holder 2003).

In other words, what we are dealing with here is a relaxing and reassuring kind of reformulation, whereby the phenomenon described is domesticated and neutralised, so to speak – i.e. rendered incapable of eliciting hostile reactions such as indignation or protest. The field of euphemistic language encompasses strategies which the speaker adopts to disguise reality. The speaker only acts with his self-interest in mind and seeks to mislead his interlocutor. Like euphemisms of a religious nature, those belonging to this class have long been known. Thus Tacitus (*Agricola* 30.4) criticised the Romans' rhetoric by putting the following words into the Briton Calgacus' mouth: “*auferre trucidare rapere falsis nominibus imperium, atque ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant*” (Reutner 2014). The purpose of such euphemisms is to conceal reality for reasons of self-interest and to trick one's interlocutor by presenting a distorted representation of the facts.

In newspapers, on television, and in the statements made by public figures, when discussing controversial and tragic topics like the denial of human rights, violence, and death, it has become increasingly common to resort to this type of rhetorical strategy, which redefines their negative content through the use of hazy and generic expressions (Bromwich 2008). For example, the verb *executed* is commonly used to refer to the death sentence, while the person carrying out the sentence, the hangman, is called *executioner* to tone down the disrepute associated with the figure of the hangman and the role he plays (Benveniste 1966).

A burning issue in recent years, connected to the abuses perpetrated at Guantánamo, Abu Ghraib, and the 2001 G8 summit in Genoa, is torture. The wide range of cases documented leaves little doubt as to the fact that this aberrant practice, decried and stigmatised by Enlightenment thinkers, has sadly become of topical relevance again in relation to both dictatorial regimes and our own democracies (Di Cesare 2016). To ensure that public opinion does not become aware of this, the media have adopted the technique of never calling torture by its real name. The assumption here is that avoiding the name will lead to the social removal of the phenomenon. The term “torture”, therefore, is being increasingly replaced with various euphemistic formulas such as *enhanced interrogation techniques*, *coercive interrogation*, *psychological pressure*, *interrogation in depth*, and *enhanced questioning*.

The semantic effect of this verbal mystification is to stretch the very concept of legality to suit one's needs, within a disturbing scenario where the law loses its fundamental function of protecting victims and becomes a tool to perpetuate the impunity of the tormentors, allowing a practice that ought to be wholly incompatible with any democratic State.

¹In the quotes from Locke, the first two numbers refer to the book and chapter, the third to the paragraph

The same kind of strategy is adopted to describe war, which by its very nature – and on account of the horrors it entails – is confirmed to be the privileged sphere for the use of euphemisms (Fisk 2007). Thus expressions such as *international policing operation*, *military action*, and *preventive action* are used, along with *peacemaking*. This last expression disguises the action involved to an even greater degree, since war is anything but a process of peacemaking. The victims of war become collateral *effects*, *collateral damage*, or *casualties*. Its agents – often mercenaries – are called *security contractors* or *security managers*. In other cases, instead, we find an oxymoron whereby the qualification of the term coincides with its actual negation, as in the case of expressions such as *humanitarian war*, *ethical war*, or *friendly fire* (to describe the unintentional bombing of one's own people). At times a totally contradictory complement of purpose is added, as in the case of the amazing expression *war for peace*, which finds a clear reference in the situation described by Orwell in his landmark novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

When discussing the war in Afghanistan, Western journalists have often referred to the various Muslims (Saudis, Jordanians, Palestinians, Chechnyans) who came to the aid of the Taliban as *foreign fighters*, the assumption being that they constituted an invading force. Yet not once has any major television channel in the West mentioned that there are at least 150,000 “foreign fighters” in Afghanistan, all wearing American, British and other NATO uniforms (Chomsky 2005: 81). In a 2004 survey Iraqis were asked: “Why do you think the United States *entered* Iraq?”, naturally avoiding the verb “invade”. Only 1% answered that the aim was to bring democracy and no less than 70% stated that the aim was to control Iraqi resources and reorganise the Middle East. This proves that “Iraqis show a much more sophisticated understanding of the West than we do ourselves” (Chomsky 2005).

The use of euphemistic circumlocutions to refer to mass exterminations dates back to a much earlier period. One of the most tragic chapters in contemporary history is the Armenian genocide of 1915, the wilful mass murder of 1.5 million Armenian Christians by the Ottoman-Turkish army and militias. To refer to this genocide the Canadian news channel CTV used the expression *deadly massacres*. Canada has a sizeable Armenian community, but it also has a large Turkish community which bitterly disputes the genocide: therefore, they cannot call the massacres a “genocide”, because it would upset the Turkish community. However, it is also true that the word “massacres” in itself is not enough to describe the killing of one and a half million human beings; hence the ridiculous tautology “deadly massacres”, as though there were some “massacres” that are not deadly and which people can survive. To refer to the wilful murder of ethnic minorities, we use expressions borrowed from German National Socialism such as *concentration camp* and *final solution*, as well as the more recent expression *ethnic cleansing*, which became common in place of *genocide* or *extermination* during the Balkan Wars. Even though many years have passed, the Vietnam War is still referred to at times as the *Vietnam conflict*, and the Iraq War has gone down in history as *Operation Desert Storm*. In France, up until Jacques Chirac's presidency in the 1990s, one would not speak of the Algerian War, but rather of *événements d'Algérie*; Germany long referred to its intervention in Afghanistan as a *Stabilisierungseinsatz* (stabilisation intervention) and only in 2010 did the then Defence Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg start using the term *war*.

In articles devoted to the Palestinian question, the occupation carried out by Israel becomes a *dispute*, as though the scenario we are dealing with were a peaceful courtroom rather than a state of permanent warfare. The semantic effect of this journalistic blurring is clear: if the land of Palestine is not being occupied but is simply at the centre of a legal dispute that might be solved in a court of justice, or through amicable debate, then a Palestinian child who throws a stone at an Israeli soldier in his territory is clearly acting insanely (Fisk 2005). Similarly, Israeli attempts to colonise Arab land, in violation of all international laws, become *Jewish settlements* or *outposts* or *neighbourhoods*. In his role as George W. Bush's Secretary of State, Colin Powell stated that US diplomats were to refer to the occupied Palestinian territories as *disputed land* and this has been accepted by most American media (Chomsky 2005). We are told that what we are dealing with in the Middle East are *competing narratives*. This phrase, with its deceptively anthropological language, rules out the possibility that one group of people – in the Middle East, for example – may be occupied, and another acting as an occupying force: according to this perspective, there is no justice or injustice, no oppression or oppressed people, but only amicable “competing narratives” that exist on an equal footing, as the two sides are “in competition”. The wall built by Israel – eight metres tall and extending for hundreds of kilometres – is described as a *defensive fence* or *defensive barrier*, slavishly copying the Israeli definition of the wall (*security fence*) and downplaying the negative impact that it has had – and continues to have – on the Palestinian population (Nirenstein 2005).

The adjectivation of a term is commonly used to create a euphemism, as in the case of the expression *torture lite* coined by the weekly magazine *Newsweek* in 2005, or the aforementioned examples involving the term “war”. However, we also find cases in which the vagueness and indefiniteness of the meaning is stressed by removing the adjective that specifies a concept. One revealing example is the expression *territories* to refer to those Palestinian territories occupied by Israel – an expression used to try and forget what really happened in Palestine.

Another sphere particularly exposed to the phenomenon of the abuse of language is economics and finance. Here certain words are feared because they speak for themselves, as do the facts they refer to, which is why they are being used less and less in contemporary journalistic parlance. The term “profit”, for example, is almost entirely avoided (Chomsky 2017); likewise, to avoid the negative perception of layoffs, this term has been replaced with euphemisms such as *re-engineering plan*, *rebalancing of the human capital* and *streamlining*, without specifying in what direction this re-engineering or rebalancing occurs (namely, downwards). In place of a direct mention of price increases, we find euphemisms such as *tariff readjustments* and *the firming of prices* which, once again, do not explicitly express the direction in which the readjustment or firming occurs (this time, upwards). Since in theory perpetual economic growth is desirable, any direct mention of the contraction of the economy is unpalatable to political rulers and is avoided, for instance, by speaking of *negative growth*.

As we have seen, the range of euphemisms employed in political communication is especially broad and varied. Their most evident consequence lies in the fact that the description of reality offered by the media is often misleading and untruthful. Therefore, many readers have become estranged from mainstream media, because they know that they are being tricked and deceived: they are aware that what they see on television or read in the papers is often an extension of what governments tell them (Prato 2019). To identify and expose these strategies of misleading manipulation is one of the crucial tasks of critical thought today. On it hinges the possibility for citizens to be more than just passive spectators of the spectacle of communication and defenceless targets of propaganda techniques. Only in such terms is the much needed process of improving the quality and reliability of public discourse conceivable.

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