

Linguosynergetic parameters of euphemia/dysphemism in the English language

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Abstract. The article suggests a new view of euphemia/dysphemism, namely from the angle of a new approach in modern linguistics, i.e. linguosynergetics. Euphemia/dysphemism are being represented as processes of cyclic self-organization of language system.

Keywords: *dysphemism, euphemism, emergence, instability, linguosynergetics, openness, ternary*

Modern scientific society tends to apply the transdisciplinary approach to different studies. The linguistic study is not an exception. The research, described in this article, aims at the study of euphemia/dysphemism using the transdisciplinary linguosynergetic approach. Linguosynergetics deals with the problem of language evolution. This article proves the facts that euphemia/dysphemism as a system is synergetic phenomenon which reveals the essence and evolution of euphemisms/dysphemisms. *The methods* of component and discourse analysis, diachronic analysis, the method of synthesis are used in the research to describe, explain the synergetic categories of euphemia/dysphemism. *The object* of the research is euphemia/dysphemism in the English language. *The subject* of the research is the linguosynergetic categories of euphemia/dysphemism. The research is based on the texts by the British writers of the XVIII–XX c. and on the lexicographic resources. The retrospective view shows the application of linguosynergetic approach to different linguistic phenomena: synergetics of a text (Moskalchuk 2003), discourse (Muratova 2011; Pikhovnykova 2011), word formation (Yenikeyeva 2011), the English language evolution (Dombrovan 2013).

Linguosynergetic analysis gives an opportunity to reinterpret all the data collected by linguists in order to create a “holistic” image of dynamic functional field which could represent cooperative interaction of pragma-semantic components bringing about the communicative intention. Thus, euphemia/dysphemism makes a complex open nonlinear system, which is constantly interacting with the medium and alternating between stages of chaos and order. The tendency to deviate from the stable communicative norm and ignore some previously irrefutable rules of speech (dysphemisms) can be explained as a consequence of democratization processes in the life of a modern society.

Fundamental aspects of euphemia/dysphemism

Euphemisms/dysphemisms as lingual, social, psychological, pragmatic units have been studied by A. Katsev, L. Krysin, V. Moskvin, M. Kovshova and many others. The researchers study different issues of their functioning: the distinction of taboo and euphemisms, the ways of euphemism formation, classifications, the influence of political correctness on euphemism. Euphemia/dysphemism are examined from the angle of gender approach and different discourse types: pedagogical, political, etc.

The content analysis of euphemisms/dysphemisms is focused on their lexical, semantic and functional dimensions.

A euphemism is used as an alternative to a dispreferred expression, in order to avoid possible loss of face: either one’s own or, by giving offense, that of the audience, or of some third party. In fact, many euphemisms are alternatives for expressions the speaker or writer would simply prefer not to use in executing a particular communicative

intention on a given occasion [1]. For example, *intimate relationship* or *affair* instead of “sexual relationship”.

Whereas the term euphemism is well-known and has wide currency, “dysphemism” does not. A dysphemism is used for precisely the opposite reason that a euphemism is used, and we define it as follows: 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. Dysphemisms, then, are used in talking about one’s opponents, things one wishes to show disapproval of, and things one wishes to be seen to downgrade, to obfuscate or offend [1]. For example, *ass*, *bird-brain*, *pinhead* for “a stupid person”.

*Linguosynergetic peculiarities
of euphemisms/dysphemisms*

Linguosynergetics regards language as self-optimizing system closely interconnected with the medium (external environment) [11, p. 129]. Various inner and outer processes give rise to functional fluctuations within the system of discourse and it starts deviating from its well-balanced harmonious state towards chaos. Striving for self-preservation the system generates new spontaneous emergent properties in order to help the discourse functional plane advance to the most ordered system area, known as the functional attractor, i.e. the communicative purpose. Surplus irrelevant information is dissipated into the medium being “forgotten” by the system.

This research proves that euphemia/dysphemism is a complex self-developing system that is based on the following synergetic categories: self-organization, nonlinearity, openness, instability, emergence, ternary structure. The euphemia/dysphemism is a dynamic, flexible and adaptive system. To preserve its vitality and functionality it must adapt to changing outer conditions, correct its inner structure and look for the new possibilities of existence.

Emergence is the formation of euphemisms/dysphemisms. The root of them is taboo. Taboo is a prescription of behavior that effects everyday life. The topics most likely to be treated euphemistically are those associated with cultural taboos, such as death, disease, sexuality and religion. In other words the emergence of euphemisms is from an interaction between semantics and the social, or socio-historical dimensions of language use. Taboos may be categorized as universal (e. g., death: *to pass away*, *to go to heaven*, *to depart*) or social (sex, excretion, etc.).

Taboo areas paradoxically encourage the opposite verbal reaction to euphemisms – dysphemisms, which are direct and coarse violations of a taboo: in the field of “death” one could cite *pushing up daisies*, *snuff*, *croak*, etc. Taboos often reveal divisions within a society, there being different conventions accordingly to class, position, sex and age.

Emergence is closely connected with one more linguosynergetic category – **attractors** (the goal of the system). Within this category we understand the communicative functions of euphemisms. Among the attractors of euphemisms we can enumerate: to avoid taboo words (*cloot* for “the devil”), to veil the truth (*conflict* instead of “war”), to valueate some not prestigious professions (*sanitation worker* for “garbage man”), to avoid discrimination (*vertically challenged* for “short”, *hearing-impaired* for “deaf”, *Afro-American* for “Black”).

Instability has been considered as a disadvantage of the system. Since language is in constant flux, as are social values, euphemisms can quickly lose their utility. Good words become bad words and become good words again in an endless succession [5, p. 13]. Euphemisms often evolve over time into taboo words themselves. Words originally intended as euphemisms may lose their euphemistic value, acquiring the negative connotations of their referents. In some cases they may be used mockingly and become dysphemisms.

For example, *sleep with* was a euphemism for *sex* for centuries. Dynamic processes gradually give rise to chaotic oscillations (fluctuations), which can influence the semantics of euphemisms so that it comes close to the branching point (bifurcation) – a point in the selection of future way of perceiving the meaning. Nowadays it doesn't conceal the notion *sex*. One more example, the feminine terms which had a neutral or even favourable significance were declined into their various senses of “kept woman”, “whore” (*mistress*, *hussy*, *puss*, *lemman*, etc.). The bifurcation – a swing to feminine abuse – was caused by extralingual factor, the spread of venereal disease. D.H. Lawrence asserted that syphilis caused a fundamental rupture in the emotional life of Renaissance England. [3, p. 226]. So throughout the centuries the euphemisms lose their euphemistic potential and become dysphemisms.

Some euphemisms have changed their gender trajectory: the word *wanton* used to have the binary meaning (“a lewd person, a lascivious man or woman”), but now it refers only to a woman. The other euphemisms can change their meanings drastically: *profligate* used to mean “abandoned to vice, lost to principle, virtue or decency; shameless in wickedness” [10], in our days – “wasting money or other things” (formal) [7, p. 1185].

The word *intimacy* used to have the meaning “friendship” in the XVIII century [8], but now it is a euphemistic substitution for “copulation” [4, p. 229]:

“...I could deny him, and showing him all the respect and upon all occasions treating him with **intimacy** and freedom as if he had been my brother” [2].

Even as some euphemisms go mainstream, others are contaminated by association with the topic they refer to and become just as dubious as the word they replaced.

It should be noted that dysphemisms are more stable than euphemisms due to their formation principles: dysphemisms highlight the negative features, euphemisms on the contrary veil them.

Openness is an exchange of energy and information with the environment. The system of euphemism/dysphemism is considered open because it is always in the process of information exchange between the society and the language. Due to the social factors some taboos disappear, on the other hand, people become eager to avoid any kind of

discrimination as for sex, age, race, etc. The diachronic analysis reveals the changes in the euphemistic and dysphemistic chains. Throughout the centuries the external factors have corrected the evolution of euphemisms/dysphemisms. To illustrate the point, in the Victorian era the pregnancy was a taboo topic. Respectable English women *didn't get pregnant* – but were *en famille*. What produced their pregnancy was only referred to in the most oblique terms. There were a lot of other euphemisms for that: *in a family way*, *in a delicate condition* *ta expecting* [5, p. 59]. Nowadays pregnancy is not such a touchy topic. Those euphemisms have become irrelevant and have been replaced by ones which reflect the reality of a modern society: *surrogate pregnancy*, *artificial insemination (IVF)*. The word *prostitute* have also undergone some euphemistic changes in the diachronic aspect: *courtesan*, *profligate woman*, *mistress*, *lady of pleasure*, *wanton*, *strumpet* (XVIII c.) < *wrong woman* (XIX c.) < *tart*, *trollop* (XX c.).

The social factors also influence the dysphemisms: it is not a sin any more to be an unmarried woman that's why the word *bastard* which used to be an offensive word for a child which was born out of marriage [13, p. 130] is irrelevant nowadays, now it is an insulting word for an unpleasant or annoying man [7, p. 109].

Ternary. Synergetic methods give us a possibility to examine euphemism/dysphemism not within a binary opposition but a ternary one, i.e. the synthesis of the three components. The analysis of these units shows that sometimes it is difficult to distinguish a euphemism and a dysphemism. To illustrate the point, *to kick the bucket* (“to die”) can have euphemistic shade in some humorous conversation with a friend, but dysphemistic while speaking to elderly people [9, p. 60]. The expression *canned goods* (“a virgin”) can be euphemistic in a male company but dysphemistic among women [14, p. 13]. K. Allan names this phenomenon as euphemistic dysphemism and dysphemistic euphemism [1]. In our view, the most relevant term for it will be *intensives*, that is, the communicative situations in which a euphemism has the signs of a dysphemism and vice versa. Here we come across a ternary of euphemism/dysphemism. This ternary can be schematized in the following way: euphemisms – intensives – dysphemisms.

So the interaction of all synergetic categories leads to the evolution of euphemism/dysphemism.

Fractals. According to Kotelnicov G. a fractal – is the phenomenon when the subsequent forms of self-organizing systems resemble the structure the previous ones [12, p. 52]. This property is called self-similarity. In our research we suppose to name the synonymous paradigms of euphemisms/dysphemisms as fractals. The more fractals represent the euphemism the stronger it is tabooed. The fractals for the notion “sexual relationships” in the XVIII century language system are represented by: *to put smb. to bed*, *to lie with smb.*, *to get to bed to smb.*, *to have smb. for someone's bedfellow*.

“...What! consent to lie with him for bread?...” [2].

“...I must put you to bed to-night together...” [2].

“...He expects to have you for his bedfellow tonight...” [2].

“...I even resolved, before he asked, to give up my virtue to him...” [2].

Another fractal row for the same notion is represented by the following euphemisms:

“...That I ought (if I consented to it) to capitulate with

him that he should never upbraid me with easiness and consenting too soon..." [2].

"...When a woman had been weak enough to yield up the last point before wedlock it would be adding one weakness to another to take the man afterwards..." [2].

It is necessary to say that context has a great impact on the formation of fractals: in their direct meaning the given words don't refer to sex and are not euphemisms.

The euphemisms of the XIX century for "sexual relationships" are represented by: *to take of somebody's helplessness, go away in the evening, to have the advantage of being constantly with her, to be warmer and blinder, etc.*

The euphemisms of the XX century: *to make love, coupling, semi-separated, natural progression of things, functional relationship, sexual intercourse, to do it, to get*

laid, to carry smb. into the bedroom, to sleep with, come-to-bed, to go to bed. Among the dysphemisms of this period there are: *to shag, to fuck and to bugger.*

Conclusion. The analysis of numerous studies suggests that euphemism/dysphemism can be examined from different perspectives due to its ambiguity. Transdisciplinary synthesis of theoretical positions makes it possible to track modern trends in the theory of euphemism/dysphemism: communicative, social, pragmatic, cognitive. The linguosynergetic approach helps to prove that this language phenomenon possesses such peculiarities as openness, instability, emergence and attractors. The most innovative category applied to euphemisms/dysphemisms is ternary. The linguosynergetic paradigm is promising in terms of analysis of the impact of the extralingual environment.

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