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Euphemism as A Stylistic Device in Politically Correct Communication

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the qualitative characteristics of euphemisms and their role in creating politically correct language. It examines euphemisms as a stylistic tool that softens or masks negative connotations through various linguistic mechanisms, such as periphrasis, hypernyms, litotes, and abbreviations. The study emphasizes the impact of temporal, social, and national factors on the evolution and usage of euphemisms. Additionally, it highlights how political correctness leverages euphemistic strategies to frame information in a more neutral and socially acceptable manner.

Keywords: Euphemism, politically correct language, periphrasis, hyperonyms, litotes, language substitution.

INTRODUCTION

By euphemism, we understand the replacement of harsh expressions with softer ones, or the substitution of prohibited terms with permissible ones. Since this changes not the meaning of the statement but only its form, the replacement of a harsh expression with a softened one naturally affects the overall stylistic tone of the speech.

When studying euphemisms, it is crucial to highlight the main aspects of this concept.

First, the most distinctive feature of euphemism is its ameliorative nature. Euphemism represents one type of ameliorative substitute. In this work, «ameliorative substitution» is understood as «the replacement of one linguistic sign with another to create an ameliorative effect» [1].

In linguistics, the concept of substitution is interpreted in various ways. Two main approaches can be identified in the study of ameliorative substitution from a synchronic perspective:

1. O. S. Akhmanova and E. S. Gritsenko adhere to a semantic interpretation, according to which ameliorative

words are considered lexemes that have components of positive evaluation in their semantic structure or possess positive expressive-emotional-evaluative meanings.

2. The second interpretation is developed in the works of V. D. Devkin and V. I. Shuvalov.

V. D. Devkin defines amelioration as «exaggeration» and sees its mechanism as the relationship between at least two lexemes, with a specific reference point. V. I. Shuvalov understands amelioration as the process of replacing one linguistic sign with another, which has more explicitly positive connotations. This concept is based, first, on the recognition of the substitutional nature of amelioration and, second, on the recognition of the leading role of pragmatic factors (specific goals and typical life situations) in the process of amelioration.

METHODS

Thus, both approaches do not contradict but rather complement and enrich each other, shedding light on the phenomenon of amelioration from two perspectives: from the point of view of semantics (the internal aspect) and

pragmatics (the external aspect). Thus, both approaches do not contradict but mutually complement and enrich each other, shedding light on the phenomenon of amelioration from two perspectives: from the standpoint of semantics (the internal aspect) and pragmatics (the external aspect).

In our study, preference is given to the pragmatic approach to studying the issue of amelioration. Since the choice of an ameliorative substitute depends primarily on the communicative-pragmatic intentions of the speaker, it becomes possible to distinguish between two types of amelioration:

1. Personal amelioration, when the speaker wants to make a favorable impression on the listener, presenting themselves as polite, well-mannered, and benevolent.
2. Social amelioration, when the speaker conforms to a social taboo that exists in society regarding certain aspects of human life.

In euphemisms, social factors predominate, with societal laws governing their usage. The degree of undesirability of using direct terms can vary from higher to lower depending on the context.

Ameliorative substitutes are used in all functional styles of modern French, but their use in different styles is oriented towards fulfilling various functions (communication, information, influence). A speaker may strive to use euphemisms in communication (the communicative function, according to V. V. Vinogradov, is realized in everyday colloquial style), in information delivery (in business, official-documentary, and scientific styles), and in performing the function of influence (in literary and journalistic styles). The role of euphemisms is particularly significant when performing the functions of communication and influence (mass media, journalism, politically correct ways of presenting information) [2].

When describing the qualitative characteristics of euphemisms, it is essential to consider the temporal, social, and national factors that influence the diversity of euphemisms in a language.

The temporal factor in euphemism: Euphemisms are particularly sensitive to changes in cultural norms, human relationships, and moral evaluations of societal phenomena. What may be considered a euphemism at one stage of societal development ceases to be so at another,

becoming a term that, from the perspective of most speakers, names the object too directly. In other words, it becomes a «politically incorrect» word. If we examine euphemistic replacements from a diachronic perspective, we can see that the «euphemistic effect» gradually fades; euphemisms, over time, lose their euphemistic or politically correct force. For example, the word «handicapé» was once a euphemistic replacement for a disabled person (instead of «un infirme, un invalide»), but now it is being replaced in the media by a softer term, «une personne à mobilité réduite» (a person with reduced mobility).

The social factor is also significant. What is perceived as a euphemism in one environment may receive different evaluations in another. The use of euphemisms also depends on the context and speech conditions—when communicating with friends, we control our speech less than when speaking in the company of colleagues or people of a different age or social level.

The national factor also plays an important role in the process of euphemism. Euphemistic patterns in different languages depend on specific national realities related to culture, history, and national character traits. In other words, the objects subject to taboo vary across different national cultures.

In this regard, V. T. Klovov's findings are particularly interesting [3]. He studied the issue of euphemism in the African variant of the French language. «The researcher notes that in this variant of French, there are relatively few euphemistic replacements related to the concept of fear, while in areas like corruption, linguistic taboos are much more active than in metropolitan French. For instance, the word «un avocat» (avocado) or «un sac de ciment» (a bag of cement) is used to refer to a bribe.»

V. T. Klovov concludes that depending on the national characteristics of a given country, specific rules of speech communication and euphemistic stereotypes develop.

Thus, we have concluded that euphemisms are a stylistic device that forms the basis of the politically correct way of conveying information, with the phenomenon of «political correctness» being something new applied to a long-existing practice. Almost all tools used to create a politically correct effect possess euphemistic (ameliorative) qualities. Euphemistic functions are performed by the following:

1. Periphrastic expressions, which replace direct «incorrect» designations.

Politically correct periphrases fulfill an euphemistic function by replacing «too direct» terms, thus conveying negative information in a «veiled» manner. The euphemistic power of such periphrases lies in their indirect, descriptive designation of objects and phenomena. Each component of politically correct periphrases carries one lexical element of the concept's meaning, which allows negative information to be downplayed or «dissolved» in the new expression. For example, to describe a dwarf, instead of «nain», the politically correct periphrase «une personne de petite taille» («a person of short stature») is used, and for a homeless person, instead of «clochard», the construction «un sans domicile fixe» («a person without a fixed residence») can be employed.

Furthermore, according to F. Vandel, periphrastic expressions not only serve to confuse or unsettle the listener with vague or unusual terms but also highlight the speaker's «education,» thereby raising their status [4]. For instance, instead of referring to problematic suburban areas as «des banlieues pourries» («rotten suburbs»), one can use the periphrase «des quartiers sensibles» («sensitive neighborhoods»), and instead of pointing out syntactic or grammatical mistakes in speech, one can refer to them abstractly as «nouvelles tendances de la langue» («new language trends»).

2. Hyperonyms, or words with a broader scope of meaning.

Analysis of periphrastic expressions has shown that a significant portion of them includes hyperonyms. The use of hyperonyms (both within expressions and independently as separate lexemes) as replacements for direct designations is one of the common ways to form politically correct vocabulary in modern French. A hyperonym is a word with a broader scope of meaning, also known as a word with «diffuse» semantics, representing generic concepts. In hyperonyms, the removal of negative connotations is possible due to the excessive number of semantic elements, among which the «dangerous» («undesirable,» «substituted») element is lost or dissolved, thus ensuring the politically correct function.

For example, the adjective «pauvre» (poor) is considered politically incorrect and demeaning, which leads to the appearance of hyperonymic replacements like «défavorisé» (disadvantaged) or «une personne en

difficulté» (a person in difficulty).

3. Litotes:

Litotes is a form of amelioration by substituting a word through negation of the opposite meaning, replacing the «undesirable» form with a «desirable» one, where the negation is explicitly marked. The softening mechanism employed through the use of hyperonyms and litotes lies in the significant discrepancy between the term and its denotatum. Negative connotations are thus leveled, erased, or obscured. This creates a stylistic effect of restrained expression, avoiding categoricity, which fulfills the main requirement of politically correct speech—addressing the issue in a soft, veiled form to hide the negative components of the meaning of the concept being represented. Due to the prevalence of this stylistic device in the creation of politically correct expressions, many French linguists refer to the politically correct style as «litotomania.»

We identified the following formal markers of politically correct litotes:

The use of double adverbs such as «pas très» (not very) and «ne plus» (no longer), which deliberately downplay the property of the object:

- «Elle n'est pas très belle» (She is not very beautiful) – to describe an ugly woman (instead of «ugly»).

- «Je n'ai plus 20 ans» (I'm no longer 20) – to indirectly indicate a person's advanced age (instead of «old»).

4. Special and scientific terms that give a «scientific» appearance to politically correct communication:

One of the postulates of political correctness can be phrased as «Faites docte!» («Speak like a scholar!») [5]. Speaking scientifically helps you avoid using terms that are uncomfortable for you for one reason or another. F. Vandel also notes this in his book «Le Dico Français/Français»: «The more scientific terms we use, the less likely we are to be contradicted. The appearance of competence silences people.» The qualities of terms, such as the absence of expression and stylistic neutrality, contribute to the widespread use of terms to replace politically incorrect vocabulary with politically correct alternatives [6].

Here's an example: The word «calvité» (baldness) evokes negative associations, so it can be replaced by the

politically correct equivalent—namely, the medical term «alopécie androgénétique» (from Latin «Alopecia», Greek «Alopekia») — «baldness caused by a deficiency of the male hormone androgen.»

5. Abbreviations, truncations, and borrowings:

In abbreviations, the negative component of the message is not expressed at all, which helps achieve the politically correct effect, that is, the softening or «masking» of the essence of the phenomenon. In modern French, several types of abbreviations perform a politically correct function:

- Words formed by abbreviating phrases and read by the alphabetical names of their initial letters (letter abbreviation).

This type of abbreviation predominates in the French language:

«Un SDF» /Es-de-ef/ – «sans domicile fixe» (homeless person – a person without a fixed residence).

Abbreviations pronounced by the initial sounds of the words in the phrase (phonetic abbreviation) can also serve a politically correct substitutive function:

«Le SIDA» /sida/ – «syndrome immuno-déficitaire acquis» (AIDS – acquired immunodeficiency syndrome).

Finally, a separate class of abbreviations can be distinguished, called apocopes (from Greek «apokoptein» – «to cut off»), which are words formed by truncating one or more final syllables.

This type of abbreviation is considered the oldest and is mainly found in colloquial speech and slang. However, apocopes are now also appearing in politically correct texts, such as:

«Un séronég» – «séronégatif» (formed in the same way as «séropo»).

RESULTS

Borrowing refers to an element from a foreign language (word, morpheme, syntactic construction, etc.) transferred from one language to another as a result of linguistic contact. It also refers to the process of transferring

elements from one language to another. Usually, words are borrowed, and less frequently, syntactic and phraseological constructions. Borrowing of sounds and word-formation morphemes from other languages occurs as a result of their secondary extraction from a large number of borrowed words.

Based on the practical linguistic material at our disposal, it has been possible to identify linguistic mechanisms functioning within the framework of «politically correct representation of reality.»

CONCLUSION

Thus, to soften negative information in the designation of a particular concept in a politically correct manner, the primary tools used are periphrastic expressions, hyperonyms, special and scientific terms, abbreviations, truncations, and borrowings.

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