

DOUBLESPEAK AND EUPHEMISMS IN BUSINESS ENGLISH

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Modern English speech, while not always, is supposed to be uncommonly frank. Doublespeak and euphemisms are cultural phenomena as well as linguistic concepts. Both are deeply rooted in social life and have a great influence on social communications. Doublespeak has become part of the general language, shaping the context in which it is used. As a linguistic concept, euphemism has fast won close relationships with the western culture, and it reflects the life and values of English people and their history.

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1. Introduction

Human beings rely on symbols to construct their individual perceptions of the exterior world. Language itself results as the individuals need to communicate with their group their realities within the confines of a set code understood by each member of the group. When conducting the social communications, according to then polite principle, people always some implicit and elegant expressions to replace those that are violent and vulgar. In a knowledge-driven economy, like that of the 21st century, artifacts of written and spoken communication (i.e., texts, in a general sense) have acquired importance as a form of capital. Organizations are also in the business of producing and brokering information. They use texts to interact with clients, with government institutions, and with other organizations. Often, these texts act as rhetorical proxies for individuals, organizations, or other constituencies who may be physically absent. Yet, unlike people, texts are resistant to change and the damage that they may cause to business relationships can be difficult to undo.

American linguist William Lutz, co-author of the SEC's *Plain English Handbook*, author of *Doublespeak* and 16 other books on writing in clear language and professor emeritus at Rutgers University, in his "Life under the Chief Doublespeak Officer", said, "If there's one product American business can produce in large amounts, it's doublespeak."⁸⁷ Euphemism is a sociolinguistic phenomenon with a wide application in English language. According to Lilia Borlongan-Alvarez, in an article entitled "The trouble with business gobbledegook" for the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (20 March 2010) "[T]he current global financial crisis which has led to the mass firing of employees has spawned popular euphemisms which both government and private organizations find convenient to use to protect the latter from embarrassment or legal action."⁸⁸

2. Definition and Usage of the Terms

2.1. Doublespeak

Doublespeak (sometimes called **doubletalk**) is any language that deliberately disguises, distorts, or reverses the meaning of words, resulting in a communication bypass.⁸⁹ Such language is associated with **governmental**, **military**, and **corporate** institutions. Doublespeak may be in the form of bald **euphemisms** ("downsizing" for "firing of many employees") or deliberately ambiguous phrases ("**wet work**" for "**assassination**"). What distinguishes **doublespeak** from other euphemisms is its deliberate usage by governmental, military, or corporate institutions or in

⁸⁷ <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/news/812924/posts>, Last visited: 13 February 2010.

⁸⁸ http://services.inquirer.net/print/print.php?article_id=20100320-259870, Last visited: 30 March 2010.

⁸⁹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doublespeak>, Last visited: 2 April 2010.

other words **doublespeak** implies an intent to mislead or deceive while **euphemism** implies and attempt to soften something harsh. The term *doublespeak* was coined in the early 1950s. It is often incorrectly attributed to George Orwell and his 1949 dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The term does not appear in that novel, although Orwell did coin *newspeak*, *oldspeak*, and *doublethink*, and his novel made fashionable composite nouns with *speak* as the second element, which were previously unknown in English. Doublespeak may be considered, in Orwell's lexicography, as the vocabulary of Newspeak, words "deliberately constructed for political purposes: words, that is to say, which not only had in every case a political implication, but were intended to impose a desirable mental attitude upon the person using them."⁹⁰ Successfully introduced **doublespeak**, over time, becomes part of the general language, shaping the context in which it is used. Lutz explains why doublespeak is counterproductive to democracy, why people need to stop being passive consumers of deceptive language and what they can do to fight back. "Clear language is essential so that both parties understand what they are agreeing to. In any contract that you enter into, you have to understand what your obligations and rights are under the terms of that contract," says Mr. Lutz. "If a company writes a contract in such a way that consumers think they understand what their obligations are, but in reality don't, they may agree to something they don't understand, and ultimately cannot fulfil. When companies use anything other than straight-forward clear language to describe the terms of an offer, they're not dealing honestly in the marketplace, in they are setting up consumers to fail."⁹¹

The following list contains some examples of doublespeak in current business English usage, with etymologies and examples of clearer, simpler words which are being avoided. Yet, this list can never be more than illustrative, and there is an ongoing debate whether all of the examples below are doublespeak.

-layoff, downsize, RIF (reduction in force): mass dismissal of employees, usually due to business restructuring or economic conditions. e.g. U.S. Bechtel, the company building Romania's Transylvania Highway, has decided to put off plans for massive *layoffs* until after April 15 when it is expected to also decide on the number of employees to be sacked.⁹²

-headcount adjustment e.g. Nokia Siemens Networks has completed the preliminary planning process to identify the proposed remaining headcount reductions necessary to reach its previously announced synergy-related *headcount adjustment* goal.⁹³

-realignment e.g. Two Procter execs promoted, one to retire, in *realignment*...⁹⁴

-rightsize e.g. Lansing can't resolve its long-term budget crisis without *right-sizing* the Department of Corrections.⁹⁵

-also counselled out, made redundant, let go, dismissed, terminated, services are no longer required, for firing in general. e.g. If, at any time in your career at Touche, the partners ever seriously questioned the possibility of your eventually joining their ranks, you would be "*counselled out*," or laid off. Consultants might be "*counselled out*" at any time of the year, but during the annual period in which promotions, raises and bonuses were determined, there was always a flurry of such dismissals.⁹⁶

⁹⁰ George Orwell, *1984*, London: Penguin Books, 2004, p.377.

⁹¹ <http://www.ontherecordpodcast.com/pr/otro/doublespeak-william-lutz.aspx>, Last visited: 4 April 2010.

⁹² <http://www.mediafax.ro/english/u-s-constructor-bechtel-puts-off-massive-layoff-plans-until-after-april-15-5823781>, Last visited: 9 April 2010.

⁹³ http://www.theregister.co.uk/2008/11/12/nokia_siemens_synergy/, Last visited: 9 April 2010.

⁹⁴ <http://www.bizjournals.com/cincinnati/stories/2007/05/14/daily3.html>, Last visited: 9 April 2010.

⁹⁵ <http://www.freep.com/article/20100308/OPINION01/3080321/Business-joins-fight-to-right-size-prisons>, Last visited: 9 April 2010.

⁹⁶ <http://financerecareers.about.com/od/changingjobs/a/layoffadvantage.htm>, Last visited: 10 April 2010.

-job flexibility: lack of job security (where job security means an actual or implied promise of continued employment). e.g. *Job flexibility* has helped Britain weather the recession...⁹⁷

-outsource: dismissing in-house employees to hire cheaper labour provided by another organization. e.g. A report by Pierre Audoin Consultants (PAC) says that Romania and other Eastern European countries are virtually ignored by U.K. companies but are predominantly the first *outsourcing* choice for the rest of Western Europe.⁹⁸

-replacement workers: scabs or strikebreakers in labour disputes. e.g. *Replacement workers* are poison to organized labour. In effect, they sabotage a union member's right to strike, at least insofar as that right was understood and expressed in the comments of Justice Brandeis.⁹⁹

2.2. Euphemisms

Neil Postman in his book, *Crazy Talk Stupid Talk*, suggests that a **euphemism** is an exalted term used in place of a down-to-earth term, or "an attempt to give prettier term to an uglier reality."¹⁰⁰ A **euphemism** is a substitution of an agreeable or less offensive expression in place of one that may offend or suggest something unpleasant to the receiver, or to make it less troublesome for the speaker, as in the case of doublespeak. According to Postman, "euphemisms are a means through which a culture may alter its imagery and by so doing subtly change its style, its priorities, and its values." Lexicographer Bergen Evans of Northwestern University, believes that euphemisms persist because "lying is an indispensable part of making life tolerable."¹⁰¹ The English word **euphemism** is found for the first time in a book written in 1656 by Thomas Blount, *Glossographia*.¹⁰² It comes from Greek *euphèmos*, which is itself derived from the adjective *euphèmos*, "of good omen" (from *eu*, 'good', and *phèmi*, 'I say'). Etymologically speaking, a **euphemism** is linked to taboos, and traditionally consists in replacing the original signifier, perceived as being offensive or unpleasant, by another one; it is often referred to as a "veil" or a "shroud" thrown over the signified, as if to conceal it.

2.2.1. Types and Formation of Euphemisms

With the development of language, euphemism is evolving day by day, new expressions being formed. Euphemisms may be formed in a number of ways. The formation of euphemism, on a certain degree, follows some principles, although some language phenomena are not reasonable but come into use frequently. Many euphemisms are figurative, many having been or are being the cause of semantic change. Some show remarkable inventiveness of either figure or form and some are indubitably playful. Euphemism can be achieved through antithetical means, e.g. by circumlocution and abbreviation, acronym or even complete omission and also by one-for-one substitution; by general-for-specific and part-for-whole substitution; by hyperbole and understatement; by the use of learned terms or technical jargon instead of common terms, and by the use of colloquial instead of formal terms. Many learned terms and some technical jargon is either borrowed from another language or constructed from one: for English, they are mostly derived from Latin or Ancient Greek.

2.2.1.1. Lexical device - Due to different types of morphemes and word formation, lexical device can be applied to the formation of English euphemism.

1. Acronym- Acronym is made up of the first letters of an expression. In the formation of

⁹⁷ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/comment/tracycorrigan/7462265/Job-flexibility-has-helped-Britain-weather-the-recession.html>, Last visited: 10 April 2010.

⁹⁸ http://news.cnet.com/2100-1011_3-5074725.html, Last visited: 14 April 2010.

⁹⁹ <http://www.counterpunch.org/macaray04162008.html>, Last visited: 14 April 2010.

¹⁰⁰ Neil Postman, *Crazy Talk Stupid Talk*, New York, Delacorte Press, 1976, p.74.

¹⁰¹ <http://www.blogger.com/least-used-expression-business-politics-and-media-youre-lying>, Last visited: 19 April 2010.

¹⁰² Cf. Burchfield, R., *An outline history of euphemism in English*, in D.J. Enright (ed.), *Fair of Speech: The Use of Euphemisms*, London, Oxford University Press, 1985, p.13.

euphemism the first letters of taboo words or unpleasant words are taken out and then put together to get rid of rudeness. **CLM** – Career Limiting Move; **COB** - Close of business; **RFP** – Request for proposal; **EOD** – End of the day.

2. Analogy - Analogy creation can account for similar forms in the conjugation of words. Basing on certain words, the new expressions are coined with similarity in meaning. This means is mainly used to form euphemisms in the field of professions. Take the word **engineer** for example, **engineer** originally refers to “skilled person who control an engine or engines, esp. on a ship or air-craft.” Later it is extended to “person who designs, builds or maintains engines, machines, bridges, railways, mines, etc. In euphemism, “engineer” is greatly adopted, such as *telephone engineer* (telephone repairer), *automobile engineer* (mechanic), and *custodian engineer* (trash cleaner). By the device of analogy, it beautifies the title of some indecent professions and shows respect to them.

3. Borrowing - English language in its development has managed to enrich its vocabulary by borrowing words from other language. **Uber** – Very. As in, I’m *uber* excited about this merger.

4. Negation - Negation in euphemism formation mainly adds prefix to show the opposite meaning. **Outsourcing** – Sending work outside your office. Often means sending work to be done abroad. **Disconnect** – Lack of understanding on an issue between two people. On the one hand it prevents hurting the listener; on the other hand it achieves the speaker’s intention as well as drives a better communication.

5. Substitution - Substitution is to take something similar to replace the real situation. **On board** - Agree with something. Or commit to be a part of something. **Magic bullet** – The perfect solution to a problem. **Interface** – Let’s meet. Let’s talk. **Heavy lifting** – Doing the hard work. **Hot button** – An important issue. **B School** - It’s “Business School”.

2.2.1.2. Syntax Device - Syntax refers to the study of the rules governing the way words are combined to form sentences in a language, or simply, the study of the formation of a sentence.

1. Metaphor

By application of metaphor, a rhetoric device, many expressions are described vividly. For example, “taxes” have become nowadays such an unpleasant civic duty that people use different euphemistic terms for this word. Therefore, it is not surprising that there is an amusing range of terms for **taxation**: “access fees/charges”, “carbon footprint contributions”, “civic assessment fees”, “direct universal service support”, “economic incentives”, “economic stimulus packages”, “environmental externality factors”, “impact fees”, “income shifting options”, “innovative sources of financing”, “late fees”, “redistribution of wealth alternatives”, “redeployment of revenue”, “restructuring of budgets”, “revenue enhancements”, “service charges”, “socially-responsible public investments”, “social support subsidies”, “transfer payments”, “universal service charges”, and “value-added revenue opportunities”.¹⁰³

2.2.2. Business Euphemisms

Euphemistic language pervades the workplace and almost all business dealings: **involuntary separation**, **letting go**, **downsizing**, **re-engineering**, **restructuring**, and **streamlining** are preferred to “layoffs.” The word **challenge** is used to actually refer to “a problem.” “Recession” is used to mean a “depression.” When one is given the **pink slip**, he or she is “fired!” And a company **disinvests** when it fact it “closes a retail outlet in a community.” It is quite acceptable in some situations if euphemisms in business are used to identify a chain of command such as in the use of **chief executive officer** instead of “boss.”

¹⁰³http://www.squidoo.com/entertaining_euphemisms#module10221385 , Last visited: 24 March 2010.

Air Cover - When a senior manager agrees to take the flak for an unpopular decision, while someone lower in the chain of command does the dirty work. e.g. “As an executive development expert, I’ve facilitated dozens of 360 degree leadership assessments, team development, and new leader assimilation processes. Along the way, I have learned that leaders get dinged if they don’t provide *air cover* to their direct reports.”¹⁰⁴

Alpha Pup - A market research term referring to the “coolest kid in the neighbourhood.” e.g. “If the *alpha pups* go for it, we’ll sell millions of them.”¹⁰⁵

Business Ecosystems - When companies in the same markets work cooperatively and competitively to introduce innovations, support new products and serve customers. e.g. “... I described how the Australian lending industry was a great example of friction-loaded *business ecosystem* and how LIXI standards are aimed at reducing some of that friction.”¹⁰⁶

Cookie Jar Accounting - An accounting practice where a company uses reserves from good years against losses that might be incurred in bad years. e.g. “Microsoft has an interesting, if dubious, *cookie jar accounting* scheme where profits from successful quarters aren’t reported so that less successful quarters can be padded.”¹⁰⁷

800-Pound Gorilla - A company that dominates an industry short of having a complete monopoly. e.g. “BlackRock Is Now the *800-Pound Gorilla*”¹⁰⁸

Ideation- Brainstorm session. e.g. “When setting up *ideation* sessions, we encourage invitations to other divisions. These newcomers will analogize a lot, relating what they hear to their own experiences.”¹⁰⁹

Market Cannibalization - When a company’s new product negatively affects sales of its existing, related products, i.e., it eats its own market. e.g. “When Bayer made a debut of its ‘maximum strength’ aspirin, the new product ate into sales of classic old standby Bayer Aspirin. Bayer officials said *market cannibalization* was the only way to retain and build market share against new Extra-Strength Tylenol.”¹¹⁰

Pain Points - A favourite of consultants used to describe places where an organization is hurting due to poor operating structure, technology or inefficiencies. e.g. “If you ask reflective questions instead of questions that can be answered with yes or no, prospects usually share more information with you. This increases your chances of uncovering *pain points* that can eventually lead to sales.”¹¹¹

Pockets of Resistance - Another borrowed military term that describes a person or group that attempts to stall, block or kill a project. e.g. “Our process includes: ... [A]chieving assimilation: coaching, problem solving, and addressing persistent *pockets of resistance*.”¹¹²

Reverbiagize - To reword a proposal with the hope of getting it accepted by people who did not like it the first time around. e.g. “Don’t worry about coming up with a new idea, we’ll just *reverbiagize* the old one.”¹¹³

¹⁰⁴ <http://www.leadershiptangles.com/2010/01/why-exceptional-leaders-provide-air-cover-and-prevent-tangles/>, Last visited: 14 April 2010.

¹⁰⁵ Ron Sturgeon, Gahan Wilson, *Green Weenies and Due Diligence, Inside Business Jargon – Raw, Serious and Sometimes Funny*, Lynden: Mike French Publishing, 2005, p.94.

¹⁰⁶ <http://frictionlessbusinessecosystems.com/>, Last visited 3 April 2010.

¹⁰⁷ <http://www.windowstpro.com/article/news2/sec-investigating-microsoft-for-cookie-jar-accounting.aspx>, Last visited: 10 April 2010

¹⁰⁸ <http://finance.yahoo.com/news/BlackRock-Is-Now-the-800Pound-ms-2019019003.html?x=0&.v=1>, Last visited: 17.04.2010.

¹⁰⁹ <http://www.allbusiness.com/sales/customer-service-product-knowledge/515566-1.html>, Last visited: 17.04.2010.

¹¹⁰ Ron Sturgeon, Gahan Wilson, *op.cit.*, p.99,

¹¹¹ <http://marketing.about.com/od/salestraining/a/salesperform.htm>, Last visited: 17.04.2010.

¹¹² http://www.tcs.com/offerings/consulting/business_consulting/Pages/default.aspx, Last visited: 16.04.2010.

¹¹³ D.W. Martin, *Officespeak: The Win-Win Guide to Touching Base, Getting the Ball Rolling, and Thinking Inside the Box*, New York: Simon&Schuster, 2005, p.79.

Tszuj (Pronounced “zhoozh”) - To tweak, finesse or improve. It is an expression made popular by TV stylist Carson Kressley, meaning to add a special flare to an outfit or hairstyle. e.g. “*Tszujing* the cost-benefit tables can get you in a lot of hot water if you’re not a math whiz who loves to tweak via trial and error.”¹¹⁴

3. Conclusion

Throughout time, language has progressively evolved and also the language and methods used by individuals who have the power to manipulate the views of the people and sway thought and behaviour. Doublespeak represents a very real danger to society that already holds influences over people’s actions and thoughts because it distorts reality by creating false communication based on contradictions, misleading words, phrases and unnecessary complexities. On the other hand, it is considered that euphemism enriches the English language, and is one of the agents of the change and development of the language as well.

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¹¹⁴Ron Sturgeon, Gahan Wilson, *op.cit.*, p.62.

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