

Оригинальная статья / Original article

UDC 811.161.1'42:811.161.1'38

<https://doi.org/10.21869/2223-151X-2023-13-1-45-51>

The role of Euphemisms in Modern Political Discourse

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Abstract

The present article is devoted to the analysis of euphemistic substitutions used in political discourse and having a particular place in mass media texts. Such studies are quite urgent because of the constant changes in the current political situation and the importance of reflecting these transformations in modern language. The purpose of this article is to study euphemisms in terms of their functioning in American political discourse. To achieve the goal, the following objectives were set: to study the concept of political discourse from different points of view, to demonstrate the veiled meaning of statements used in political texts of the media and American politicians' speeches, and to consider methods of influencing the mass consciousness of native speakers. The study is based on the ability of euphemisms not only to neutralize negative values according to generally accepted political correctness but also to change the meaning of the statement in order to achieve the necessary communicative effect. It is taken into account the phenomenon of euphemism having been studied in sufficient detail from different angles. With the aim of finding out how to use implicit influence through political euphemisms it was provided an overview of the mass media such as USA Today, The Washington Post, The New York Times, CNN International. It was revealed that euphemisms are able to hide true meaning and thereby have an impact on the opinion of society, so they can be used as manipulative language means directing the audience's attitude towards certain things in the desired way.

Keywords: euphemisms; political discourse; mass consciousness; political correctness; manipulative means.

Conflict of interest: The Author declare the absence of obvious and potential conflicts of interest related to the publication of this article.

For citation: Kondratenko E. N. The role of Euphemisms in Modern Political Discourse. *Izvestiya Yugo-Zapadnogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta. Seriya: Lingvistika i pedagogika = Proceedings of the Southwest State University. Series: Linguistics and Pedagogics*. 2023, 13(1): 45–51 (In Russ.). <https://doi.org/10.21869/2223-151X-2023-13-1-45-51>.

Received 20.12.2022

Accepted 18.01.2023

Published 15.04.2023

УДК 811.161.1'42:811.161.1'38

Роль эвфемизмов в современном политическом дискурсе

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Резюме

Настоящая статья посвящена анализу эвфемистических замен, используемых в политическом дискурсе и занимающих особое место в текстах средств массовой информации. Подобного рода исследования достаточно актуальны вследствие постоянных изменений текущей политической обстановки и важности отражения этих трансформаций в современном языке. Целью данной статьи является изучение эвфемизмов с точки зрения их функционирования в американском политическом дискурсе. Для достижения этой цели были поставлены следующие задачи: изучить концепцию политического дискурса с различных точек зрения, продемонстрировать завуалированное значение утверждений, используемых в политических текстах средств массовой информации и выступлениях американских политиков, а также рассмотреть методы влияния на массовое сознание носителей языка. Исследование основано на способности эвфемизмов не только нейтрализовать отрицательные значения в соответствии с общепринятой политкорректностью, но и изменить смысл заявления для достижения необходимого коммуникативного эффекта. Принято во внимание явление эвфемии, изученное достаточно подробно под разными углами. С целью выяснения оказания неявного влияния на массовое сознание с помощью политических эвфемизмов был проведен анализ эвфемистических замен, выполненный на основе выборки текстов из средств массовой информации, таких как USA Today, The Washington Post, The New York Times, CNN International. Выяснилось, что эвфемизмы могут скрывать истинный смысл с помощью таких методов, как неполное представление информации, совмещение реальности с предположениями и домыслами, задержка подачи фактов, заведомо неверная информация и др. Таким образом, эвфемистические замены могут оказывать влияние на взгляды общества, в результате чего могут быть использованы в качестве манипулятивных средств языка, тем самым направляя мнение получателей информации в нужное русло.

Ключевые слова: эвфемизмы; политический дискурс; массовое сознание; политкорректность; манипулятивные средства.

Конфликт интересов: Автор декларирует отсутствие явных и потенциальных конфликтов интересов, связанных с публикацией настоящей статьи.

Для цитирования: Кондратенко Е.Н. Роль эвфемизмов в современном политическом дискурсе // Известия Юго-Западного государственного университета. Серия: Лингвистика и педагогика. 2023. Т. 13, № 1. С. 45-51. <https://doi.org/10.21869/2223-151X-2023-13-45-51>.

Статья поступила в редакцию 20.12.2022 Статья подписана в печать 18.01.2023

Статья опубликована 15.04.2023

Introduction

The use of euphemistic substitutions in modern political discourse is of particular importance contributing to the observance of political correctness and mitigating the true state of affairs. It should be noted that political correctness is an integral part of the US ideology striving for tolerance, the equation

of rights, democratization and the elimination of discrimination. As a result, the information field is saturated with lexical units that veil concepts undesirable in society, often associated with racial, religious, gender, cultural and other differences.

The phenomenon of euphemia has been studied in sufficient detail from different an-

gles taking into account sociolinguistic and functional aspects. Scholars such as V.P. Moskvina, J.S. Neaman, Silver C. G., Rees N. A. [1, 2, 3], and others dealt with the classification of euphemisms and their role in the lexical space of language. Previously, we have already analyzed the definitions of euphemisms and their influence on the formation of value guidelines for native speakers [4].

Materials and Methods

The objective of this work is to study euphemisms in terms of their functioning in American political discourse, taking into account the methods of veiling used in political communication in order to reduce negative connotations and influence mass consciousness.

Methodological apparatus. To achieve the objective, the following methods were used: comparative analysis of excerpts from English-language media: USA Today, The Washington Post, The New York Times and CNN International served as material for the study. The choice of these publications is explained by sufficient popularity and authority among native speakers. More than 100 texts published during recent years were analyzed.

Results

Current political situation is the most relevant place for the functioning of euphemisms. This is due to the constant demonstration of military capabilities, the representation of influencing capabilities, and the strengthening of the rules of public communication behavior. In this regard, American political discourse demands detailed study due to the general knowledge of the events taking place in the United States that affect the political situation in the world. The veiled meaning of euphemistic statements in American political discourse is determined by a strategy of evading truth and hiding unpleasant phenomena of reality [5].

According to one of the definitions, political discourse is a collection of any speech acts used in political debate [6, p. 6]. T. Van

Dijk [7, p. 9] understands political discourse to mean the interaction of politicians, implemented in the form of government documents, parliamentary debates, party programs and speeches of politicians. Some scholars view political discourse in terms of its similarity to ideological discourse. So, according to Yu.A. Sorokin [8, p. 57], political discourse is a kind of ideological discourse. The difference is that political discourse is explicit and ideological - implicit.

Thus, political discourse is characterized as an essential part of socio-political relationships with its complex system of knowledge and action. At the same time, political communication is determined not only by linguistic verbal and non-verbal means but also by extralinguistic factors that are due to value characteristics and cognitive processes that occur in society. Political discourse typically includes forms of written and oral communication such as: public speaking, political shows, treaties, election campaigns, newspaper articles, comments on publications, conferences, interviews, etc. Thus, in order to study the functioning of euphemisms in political discourse, varieties of political communication aimed at a mass audience are more suitable. This task is often handled by the media that play a significant role in influencing the consciousness of native speakers.

Political discourse encapsulates certain ideological views, including the ideology of political correctness. This linguistic and cultural-behavioral phenomenon originated in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States due to the need to find lexical units suitable for a certain situation, replacing those that offend someone's feelings and dignity, infringe on rights, put a person in an uncomfortable position and discriminate against him against race, gender, social affiliation, health restrictions, appearance, etc. [9]. Politicians and journalists often have to follow the norms of political correctness in order to carry out effective communication which leads to the use of words that distort objective reality, soften and often replace

true lexical meanings [10]. As a result, the speeches of political figures contain linguistic means to hide the negative aspects of the phenomena of the surrounding world. So, in the speech of Steve Cohen, a congressman, a member of the Progressive Faction of Congress, you can notice the camouflage of negative values using positive assessment lexemes: *"They have good attitudes and good instincts and good goals. But they haven't been legislators, most of them, for a very long period of time and a lot of them have been activists and try to get things in other ways"* [11]. However, despite the use of positive connotations, the presence of implicit negative connotations hinting at the incompetence of other members of Congress is noticeable. As another example, let's give an excerpt from an article about the assistant to former US President Donald Trump: *"He earned plaudits for reducing the staff infighting and bringing some semblance of order to a White House where an open door to the Oval Office symbolized a table of organization with no clear lines of authority"* [12]. According to the text, we can see that the president's staff manager has earned praise for "earned plaudits", but then we feel critical of the situation due to the expressions "some semblance" - a kind of order and "with no clear lines of authority" - without strong positions of power.

Pre-election political discourse also uses veiled subtexts to influence mass consciousness. So, in the political debate for the post of mayor of New York, one of the candidates says the following: *"We don't need a manager, we need a visionary"* [13] hinting that his opponent, who worked as an agency manager before the election, is not suitable for the role of head of such a large city. Also of interest is a quote from The Washington Post: *"...Trump was getting advice about blocking certification of the election from a lawyer he had first seen on television and the president's actions were so unsettling that his top general and the House speaker discussed the nuclear chain of command"* [14], demonstrating an ironically negative

attitude towards former US President Donald Trump. Often in pre-election political discourse it can be found distrust of the statistics received on a particular issue: *"The question is why voters are reluctant to support the Republicans, and how much we should read into such data"* [15]. According to the article, voters should not blindly rely on such an American-respected approval rating and question the data obtained from a population survey. Thus, it is covertly implied that statistics may be adjusted to reflect incorrect information.

At present, the influence of political correctness on the lexical composition of the language is obvious. According to D. Adler, the main trend in modern English is its inclusive nature, the desire not to offend anyone when using any careless word or expression [16]. Thus, lexical units that go beyond politically correct views, in order to avoid infringement of someone's rights, are replaced by new "inclusive" concepts.

Political euphemisms are also characterized by the formation of the binary opposition of "one's own vs. other's". [17, p. 77]. This contrast is formed on an axiological basis, having "one's own" on the positive side of the scale, and "other's" on the opposite, i.e. negative. Such distribution is highly inherent in political discourse, within which conflict situations and foreign policy relations are implemented. It will be relevant to give an example of the confrontation between the United States and Russia, in particular, during the recent events related to hacker attacks on American sites. Obviously, in the texts of the American media, the US government is on the positive side, while the Russian one is on the negative side, as evidenced by the following excerpt from CNN: *"Russia is conspicuously absent from the meetings as the White House tries to make progress in bilateral talks with Moscow"* [18]. Based on the content of the passage, Russian representatives are absent from meetings dedicated to solving the problem of virus attacks which seems to indicate disrespect for the North American partner.

In turn, representatives of the White House are trying to make progress in bilateral negotiations with Moscow, which, apparently, should position them in a positive and evaluative context. A similar situation is observed in the review of the analysis of data on the approval rating of the main political parties of the United States. The party obviously supported by the publication appears on the positive side, while opponents are criticized, which leads to biased coverage of the election race: *“A likely culprit appears to be the Supreme Court overturning Roe v. Wade, which has coincided with Democrats’ sudden streak of special-election success. Another possibility is that the investigation into the top-secret and other documents found at Trump’s Mar-a-Lago estate is keeping the focus on his own party and its liabilities — perhaps in some combination with weak and ideologically extreme GOP candidates dominating the headlines”* [15].

Discussion

An important aspect of the use of euphemisms is their manipulative function which allows an implicit influence on mass consciousness. We agree with S.G. Kara-Murza [19] that the manipulative function in this case is based on the following techniques:

- incomplete provision of information in the case of advertising only a certain part of the genuine data, as a result of which the distribution of the reality picture occurs unevenly;
- combining reality with assumptions and speculation, which provokes difficulties in perceiving the text and separating incorrect information from correct information;
- delayed filing of facts, delaying the voicing of this state of affairs until this information becomes irrelevant;
- deliberately incorrect but predictable news, the content of which meets the expectations of the audience.

Thus, in the process of using euphemistic substitutions in political discourse, which reveals a certain type of manipulation, the

nature of the perception of denotate changes. The given examples, taken from media texts, vividly demonstrated the ability of euphemisms to help hide true meaning and thereby influence the opinion of society. Therefore, the imposition of political views and assessments of events takes place implicitly and contributes to the formation of substitution concepts.

Conclusion

Thus, the examples of euphemization in political discourse given by us demonstrate the manipulative function of euphemisms by means of belittling, hidden or explicit criticism, veiling or softening of negative phenomena, as well as the opposition of “one’s own vs. other’s”. An analysis of American mass media shows that problems related to internal government relations, election campaigns, as well as foreign policy issues, tend to become key topics in newspapers texts. The latter, in turn, being part of political discourse, often embellish reality, adhere to the rules of political correctness, have an orientating effect on mass consciousness and contribute to the spread of certain views and ideas.

Consideration of methods of influencing the mass consciousness of native speakers confirmed that euphemisms can hide the true meaning using methods such as incomplete provision of information, combining reality with assumptions and speculation, delay in the submission of facts, deliberately incorrect information, etc. Thus, euphemistic substitutions can influence the views of society, as a result of which they can be used as manipulative means of language, thereby directing the opinion of recipients of information on the right track. We can conclude that the functioning of euphemistic substitutions in American political discourse is due to the replacement of words or expressions that do not meet the communicative goals of the author of the text with more suitable ones. As a result, there is an exclusion of direct nomination of phenomena that can cause a negative reaction, hurt feelings or

violate the rights of the recipient. Euphemisms of this kind are often used as manipu-

lative language tools that can direct the audience's opinion in the right way.

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