

The art of telling it like it isn't

May 28 2012, By Professor Kate Burridge



There are certain things in life we'd rather not conjure up too vividly, and for this we have at our disposal a range of linguistic deodorisers, smokescreens and fig leaves. These are euphemisms. They are about taboos (those things that go bump in the night), they are about politeness - and sometimes they are about skeletons in cupboards.

No matter what [population group](#) you look at, past or present, you'll find them. In classical times, nasty verbs such as die and kill were avoided. Instead, people curled up, they went to sleep or on a journey - or they

were described as having lived. Nineteenth-century moral code prevented those in polite society from uttering words such as legs, trousers and underclothing. In their place were invisible words such as inexpressibles and unmentionables (you might compare the smalls and foundation garments of last century). Another invisible word in Victorian times was the monosyllable - these days it's the C-word. Many people associate euphemisms with deliberately befuddling language, weasel words and puffery - the sort of doublespeak that turns the loss of human life into collateral damage, and lies into terminological inexactitudes. However, the underlying motives are not always malign. Besides, there will be times when upfront language isn't appropriate. Say you have the inner urge to swear, but it's not the right moment for a full-blown obscenity. Euphemism provides the "out" in the form of remodellings such as "Sugar!" or "Shucks!"

Euphemisms shield against what's embarrassing, what's feared and what's unwelcome. They are also used to talk up and inflate - potholes are transformed via euphemistic magic into pavement deficiencies, cheese on toast into Welsh rarebit.

It's all dishonest, of course. Even well-intentioned euphemisms involve a kind of double-think. In a given context, something taboo can be acceptably spoken of using a euphemism but not a direct term - I'm going to the loo has fewer unpleasant connotations than I'm going for a piss. It's as if the [obscenity](#) lies in the taboo words themselves, not in what they represent. People even call them "dirty words".

And such is their potency that they contaminate others, often bringing down innocent bystanders that just happen to sound similar. The old word "feck", meaning "efficacy", had nothing to do with the dreaded F-word, but that didn't save it. Taboo words are such attention-grabbers. Even when we jumble up their letters (as with the clothing label FCUK), they leap out at us.

So how do you go about disguising disagreeable reality?

There are many strategies. Nebulousness is one. Say you want a delicate reference to one of those curiously named private parts, a word such as groin provides the fig leaf. Its imprecise location makes it a perfect euphemism for anything unmentionable in that general vicinity. Another strategy is long-windedness. Traffic jams sound so much nicer when they are localised capacity deficiencies. Under cover of words we can tiptoe around any sensitive topic, and the more words the better.

There are sneaky grammatical devices, too. Some might recall 1999 was the Year of the Older Person. So how old is older? Without comparison provided, older blurs the edges - and, illogically, older becomes not as old as old. Compare the longer living, a euphemism from the 1970s, or the fuller figure in the fashion industry.

Nearly all these expressions are doomed to be short-lived. As the taboo sense declares itself, so the qualities of the euphemism diminish, and the next generation of speakers grows up learning it as the direct term - or worse. It's hard to imagine toilet was ever a sweet-smelling euphemism (originally the French diminutive of toile "cloth"). Taboo areas perpetually generate narrowing of meaning and corrosion. The result is a flourishing of vocabulary as people seek less offensive words to speak the unspeakable: latrine > water closet (WC) > toilet > bathroom/washroom. The image is that of an ever-grinding lexical mill and the more severe the taboo, the longer the chain of euphemistic substitutions.

Only occasionally does a euphemism survive. The positive terms geriatric and senile fell badly from grace, but aged and ageing have been around far longer and haven't suffered the same fate. Elderly is about 400 years old. Its verbal veneer is wearing thin, but the word is not yet contemptuous. In other domains, there are some remarkably durable

euphemisms. People have been sleeping with each other since the 10th century. Linguistic familiarity doesn't always breed contempt - but how did these terms escape the corroding influences of time?

It's true we grow impatient with the pretence that sweeter words will somehow produce a sweeter world, and there's something attractive about a no-frills, say-it-as-it-is, euphemism-free language. But what would life be like if we all said exactly what was on our minds, in the plainest and most explicit of terms? Hell upon earth.

Provided by Monash University

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