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Sexual Euphemisms in the English Language

Introduction

Every person on Earth is a member of a particular speech community. According to Farb, we are born into “a world where the rules of grammar [of our language] and of appropriate speech in various situations already exist” (84). However, language is used to express certain matters and categories of words as well as to avoid them. As Wardhaugh notes: “[c]ertain things are not said, not because they cannot be, but because people do not talk about them, or, if those things are talked about, they are talked about in roundabout ways” (238). In the first case, we have instances of taboo; in the second case we are talking about the employment of euphemisms in order to avoid mentioning certain matters directly. A specific type of euphemisms will be analyzed and discussed in this paper, namely, the euphemisms from the sphere of sexual relations.

Taboos

Borrowed from Tongan, a language of Polynesia, and first introduced into English by Captain Cook, the term *taboo* generally signifies that “a thing is forbidden” (Ullmann 204) in a given society. Linguistically speaking, *taboo* signals that it is

“forbidden to name the referred *designatum* by a transparent *designans*” (Calvo 63) and, therefore, the term *taboo* is extended to “all those words or sets of words referring to objects, concepts or actions that a given society considers to be individually or collectively subjected to prescription” (Calvo 64). Wardhaugh notes that tabooed subjects can vary from death, excretion, bodily functions, religious matters, politics to sex: “tabooed objects that must be avoided or used carefully can include your mother-in-law, certain game animals, and use of your left hand (the origin of *sinister*)” (239). According to the psychological motivation behind them, Ullmann divided linguistic taboos into three distinct groups: *the taboos of fear*, *the taboos of delicacy* and *the taboos of propriety*.

The taboos of fear comprise all religious referents. For instance, the Jews were not allowed to refer directly to God; they used the word *master* instead. The same avoidance can be seen in other contemporary languages, e.g. in English *the Lord*, in French *Seigneur*, in German *der Herr*, or in Croatian *Gospodin*. There are also numerous euphemisms for the devil, as well as for the evil spirits and other ordinary creatures, and things endowed with supernatural qualities. Names of inanimate objects can also be struck by a taboo ban, with the aforementioned use of your left hand being one of the most famous examples: in Latin *sinister*, in Italian *sinistro*, in French *gauche* (originally clumsy, the wrong way), in English *left* (originally meaning weak, worthless). The taboos of delicacy avoid direct reference to unpleasant subjects. These taboos include topics related to illness and death. Another class of words which are often avoided are names of criminal actions such as cheating, stealing and killing, e.g., in French stealing is traditionally paraphrased as *corriger la fortune* (meaning the correction of fortune). The taboos of propriety focus on the three great spheres that are most directly affected by this form of taboo: swearing,

certain parts and functions of the body, and the subject matter of this paper: sex. The sense of decency and propriety has been throughout the ages a rich source of taboos. A number of expressions from the sphere of sexual relations will be presented later in this paper to illustrate this tendency.

The English language also has its taboos, and most people who speak English know what these are and observe the rules of their usage. There are some rebels that willingly break those rules and violate linguistic taboos on occasion for different reasons: “. . . to draw attention to oneself, or to show contempt, or to be aggressive or provocative, or to mock authority – or, according to Freud, on occasion as a form of verbal seduction, e.g., talking dirty” (Wardhaugh 239). Faced with the prospect of a penalty for breaking a linguistic taboo, which is often severe, as blasphemy and obscenity are still crimes in many jurisdictions, e.g., the violators of blasphemy laws that are in place in some countries face fines and restrictions, prison sentences, and even death sentences, the majority of speakers chooses to follow rules set by their speech community and not to break any linguistic taboos. So, in order to abide by those rules, in most cases “the tabooed word will be abandoned and a harmless substitute, a euphemism, will be introduced to fill the gap” (Ullman 205).

Euphemisms

The term *euphemism* comes from the Greek word *εὐφημία*, which in turn is derived from the Greek root-words *eû*, meaning “well” or “sounding good,” and *phémē*, meaning “speech.” Euphemisms are, therefore, “mild, agreeable, or roundabout words used in place of coarse, painful, or offensive ones” (Rawson 1). They are “a compensating strategy in language to skirt the taboo word” (Farb 87) and represent “the cognitive process of conceptualization of a forbidden reality,

which, manifested in discourse through the use of linguistic mechanisms . . . enables the speaker, in a certain context or in a specific pragmatic situation, to attenuate, or, on the contrary, to reinforce a certain forbidden concept or reality” (Casas Gómez 739). The main strategies of indirectness, according to Cruse, are “metonymy, generalization, metaphor and phonological deformation” (58) (see Table 1), while the most common topics for which we use euphemisms are sexual activities and sex organs, bodily functions such as defecation and urination, death, and aspects of religion and money.

Table 1

Main strategies of indirectness (Cruse 58):

Sex:	<i>intercourse</i>	<i>go to bed with</i> (metonymy), <i>do it</i> (generalization)
	<i>penis</i>	<i>His member</i> was clearly visible (generalization)
Bodily function:	<i>defecate</i>	<i>go to the toilet</i> (metonymy), <i>use the toilet</i> (generalization)
Death:	<i>die</i>	<i>pass away</i> (metaphor), <i>He-s no longer with us</i> (generalization)
Religion:	<i>God</i>	<i>gosh, golly</i> (phonological deformation)
	<i>Jesus</i>	<i>gee whiz</i> (phonological deformation)
	<i>Hell</i>	<i>heck</i> (phonological deformation)

The use of euphemisms is linked with the notion of linguistic politeness. According to Cruse, “politeness is a matter of minimizing the negative effects of what one says on the feelings of others and maximizing the positive effects” (131). The use and development of euphemisms is governed by the Pollyanna Principle and “this enjoins us to avoid drawing attention to things which are not mentioned in polite company” (Cruse 132). However, speakers themselves choose when and how they will use those euphemisms. Therefore, euphemisms can be divided into two types: positive and negative. According to Rawson, the positive ones “inflate and magnify, making the euphemized items seem altogether grander and more important than they really are” (1). On the other hand, the negative euphemisms “deflate and diminish. They are defensive in nature, offsetting the power of tabooed terms and otherwise eradicating from the language everything that people prefer not to deal with directly” (Rawson 1).

Euphemistic words and expressions allow us to talk about unpleasant things, and disguise or neutralize the unpleasantness, and they also allow us to give labels to unpleasant tasks and jobs in an attempt to make them sound almost attractive. They make obscure the things people fear the most: death, the dead, the supernatural, and they cover up the facts of life: of sex and reproduction and excretion. Hence, euphemisms are “society’s basic *lingua non franca*” (Rawson 1). As such, they are outward and visible signs of our inward anxieties, conflicts, fears, and shames. Therefore, a person using euphemisms is actually speaking “the language of evasion, hypocrisy, prudery, and deceit” (Holder vii), for they are trying to avoid talking about things that are a natural part of life.

Euphemisms are “in a constant state of flux” (Rawson 4). New euphemisms are constantly being invented, because after a while, the substituted words become too infected for use in polite society: “[i]f two words sound alike, and one of them is taboo, then the respectable word often becomes taboo as well” (Farb 89). Examples for this phenomenon can be found in the USA in the animals that were once known as *cock* and *ass*, but now they are usually called *rooster* and *donkey*. Moreover, in some parts of the rural South speakers to this day do not tell *cock* and *bull tales* but rather *rooster* and *ox stories* because *cock*, *bull* and *tale* (*tail*) of the first utterance are taboo. Many new euphemisms prove to be nonce terms, while those “that are ratified through reuse as true euphemisms” may last for generations, even centuries, while others “fade away or develop into unconscious euphemisms, still used, but reflexively, without thought of their checkered origins” (Rawson 4). However, euphemisms are embedded so deeply in our language that “few of us, even those who pride themselves on being plainspoken, ever get through a day without using them” (Rawson 1). In other words, euphemisms have become a part of our everyday language.

Sexual Euphemisms

Just like euphemisms that were a response to linguistic taboos created by a given society, the sexual euphemisms “[originated] from society’s inability to accept sexuality as a normal part of existence” (Tate vii). Their use is motivated from the wish or need to bypass the ban to avoid punishment to the innate human joy in verbal creativity, and with “no limits to human ingenuity in its endeavor to express/disguise and to display/hide sexuality” (Calvo 63) there are numerous ways how one can find or make a suitable euphemism for doing *the big nasty*. As Berdoll illustrates, one has

to merely select any combination of an adjective from the first column and noun from the second located in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Combinations of words to express sexual relations (Berdoll 85):

ADJECTIVE	NOUN
physical	congress
carnal	knowledge
intimate	necessities
capital	embrace
amorous	favours
connubial	attention
passionate	connection
fulfilling	arrangements
horizontal	relief
illicit	affections
nocturnal	pleasures
conjugal	union
voluptuous	combat
loving	consummation
secret	deed
lewd	rites
naughty	conflict
night	association

nuptial

coupling

It would seem that the English language has been infused with euphemisms since its inception. According to Farb, the first English sexual euphemisms were created during the Norman Conquest of England in 1066. At that time, the community began to make a distinction between “a genteel and an obscene vocabulary, between the Latinate words of the upper class and the lusty Anglo-Saxon of the lower” (Farb 89). That is why a duchess *perspired* and *expectorated* and *menstruated*, while a kitchen maid *sweated* and *spat* and *bled*. As mentioned before, people often rely on Latin when talking about sex as in *in coitu* or *actus coitus*; however, Shakespeare can also be a great source for sexual euphemisms. Although his *top* is obsolete, his *beast with two backs*, *behind door work*, *to dance on one’s heels*, *lay it to one’s hear*, *very lists of love*, or *to make one’s heaven in a lady’s lap* sound much classier than contemporary sexual euphemisms such as *to hide the salami*, *take the skin boat to tuna town* or *wax that ass*. In Victorian times, *illicit love* referred to intercourse between anyone who was not married. Berdoll reports that those activities were considered to be so heinous that they were called *criminal conversation* (86). If it became necessary to allude to them in print, the term had to be shortened, because it was too explicit and was abbreviated as *crim. con.* or even *c.c.* However, the late twentieth century may have seen a considerable change in regard to linguistic taboos as certain social constraints have loosened. That decline may have been more than matched by the marked increase in “the use of euphemistic language, the dressing up in language of certain areas in life to make them more presentable, more polite, and more palatable to public taste”

(Wardhaugh 240). Nevertheless, in the recent years there has been an increase in coining new sexual euphemisms.

Analysis of sexual euphemisms found in the literature

In order to *bump uglies* or give somebody a *hot meat injection*, one must start with a little foreplay. This is also known as *canoodling*. Usually the road to *Netflix and chill* begins with kissing, which is also known as *chewing* or *sucking face*, or, in sports terms, engaging in *tonsil hockey* or *arriving at first base*. With heterosexual couples, *second base* will be reached when a man *cops a feel* above the woman's waist, and when he is ready to move on from fondling her *sweater puppies*, he will continue with the investigation and stimulation of female's *privates*, also known as *down there*, and will get to *third base*, while he will also *score a home run* if he *goes all the way*. However, if the male *member* remains *flaccid* regardless of encouragement, he is suffering from *orgiastic impotence*, and has not only *failed in the furrow*, but has earned himself, and his owner, the nickname *Mr. Softy*.

The previous paragraph illustrated the plethora of sexual euphemisms found in literature and serves as an introduction to the analysis of euphemisms associated with sexual behavior in which Berdoll's *Very Nice Ways to Say Very Bad Things: An Unusual Book of Euphemisms*, Calvo's *Sexual euphemisms in the history of the English language: sample probe 0*, Holder's *Dictionary of Euphemisms: How not to Say What You Mean*, Rawson's *Dictionary of Euphemisms and Other Doubletalk: Being a Compilation of Linguistic Fig Leaves and Verbal Flourishes for Artful Users of the English Language* and Tate's *Contemporary Dictionary of Sexual Euphemisms* were used as the source material. Although Calvo warns that any attempt of taxonomy of sexual euphemism would prove to be a difficult task, the analyzed euphemisms were divided into three major categories: euphemisms referring to the

penis, vagina or breasts, euphemisms referring to masturbation, and euphemisms referring to sexual intercourse. Euphemisms related to sexual acts that involve special techniques or the use of props like wigs in *Mozart the Amadeus*, participation of more than two people in the sexual intercourse like in *the Challenger*, stimulation of genitalia or anus performed by other person or the use of feces like in *the Cleveland Steamer*, as well as being performed under specific conditions like being outdoors in *the Postman*, were not included in the analysis.

Similarly to the other key components of human anatomy, the penis, vagina and breasts have a wide variety of other names. Six general sub-categories of euphemisms referring to the penis can be distinguished: anatomical illusions, generalizations, miscellaneous metaphors, nonsense and baby talk, personal names, and weaponry (Rawson 209) (see Table 3); however, the euphemisms for the vagina can be divided into three general sub-categories: the general, the physical, and the poetical (Rawson 296) (see Table 4), while the most of the euphemisms for female breasts, or *bosom*, *boobs*, or *boobies*, relate to form, function, or size (Rawson 37) (see Table 5). After the analysis of euphemisms for the penis, vagina and breasts, we can only agree that “for the psycho-analytically prone, any straight line stands for a penis and any curve or concavity for a vagina or an anus” (Ferénczi, S. *Sex in Psychoanalysis*. 1916., cited in Calvo 63).

Table 3

Categorization of euphemisms for penis (based on euphemisms listed by Berdoll, Calvo, Holder, Rawson and Tate)

anatomical allusions	between the legs, joint, lower abdomen/stomach, male/private parts, (virile) member, organ, sex, south, third leg
generalizations	affair, apparatus, business, equipment, essentials, gadget, gear, instrument, movement, person, sex, thing(y), works
miscellaneous metaphors	bald-headed hermit, baldy fellow, banana, bat, bishop, bone, cock, eel, family jewels, horn, ladies delight, manhood, man-root, masculinity, meat, one-eyed trouser snake, one-eyed yogurt-slinger, pecker, pride, python, rod, sausage, serpent, yard
nonsense and baby-talk	ding-a-ling, peenie, wee wee, weenie, wiener, willie
personal names	Cecil, Dick/Dicky, Harry, John Thomas, Johnson, Percy, Peter, Roger, Tommy
weaponry	abdominal protector, (Adam's) arsenal, bayonet, bazooka, blade, chopper, dagger, dirk, dribbling dart of love, engine (of war), gun, (spam) javelin, lance (of love), machine, pistol, prick, purple helmeted warrior (of love), short arm, spear, staff, sword, tool, truncheon, weapon

Table 4

Categorization of euphemisms for vagina (based on euphemisms listed by Berdoll, Calvo, Holder, Rawson and Tate)

the general	bellow stairs, business, down below/there, intimate part, it, organ, private parts, nature's veil, piece, privy parts, pudendum, south, thing, toy, treasure, what-do-you-call-it, you-know-what
the physical	aperture, bearded clam, beaver, case, cauliflower, circle, fanny, fig, fish pond, kitty, mickey, muff, nick, nooky, notch, orifice, ring, 0
the poetical	ace of Spades, Adam's own, aphrodisiacal tennis court, alter of Hymen, bower of bliss, cabbage garden, carnal trap, coffee house, Cupid's alley/arbours, delicate glutton, delta of Venus, Eve's Custom House, eye that weeps, furnace mouth/garden, feminine gender, honeypot, Lapland, living fountain, love's lane/paradise/sweet quiver, nether parts/region, oval office, postern gate to the Elysian field, seminary, sensible part, temple of Venus, tufted love mound, Venus's mark, yum-yum

Table 5

Categorization of euphemisms for breasts (based on euphemisms listed by Berdoll, Calvo, Holder, Rawson and Tate)

form	balcony, glops, headlights, love bubbles, molehills, pointers,
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	pumps, teats, teacups
function	dairies, jugs (of milk), mammary (glands), milk bottles, milkers
size	apples, bodacious ta-tas, bazookas, bouncers, grapefruit, knockers, melons, pears, watermelons

When talking about masturbation, the term *masturbation* is beginning to be phased out by terms that cause less guilt about indulging in this near-universal practice such as *self-pleasuring* or *self-love*. Although euphemistic terms for *self-pleasuring* may refer to general *self-love*, more euphemistic examples were found for male *self-love* and female *self-love*, respectively (see Table 6).

Table 6

Categorization of euphemisms for masturbation (based on euphemisms listed by Berdoll, Calvo, Holder, Rawson and Tate)

general masturbation	auto-erotic practices, bring off, charge, come, get off, self-love, self-pleasuring, sin of youth, Southern Comfort, wrist job
male masturbation	bash the bishop, beat your meat, buff the banana, choke the chicken, digitally oscillate one’s penis, five against one, five-fingered widow, hang (your) johnny, knuckle shuffle, milk the snake, paddle the pickle, paint the pickle, penile regurgitation,

punch the munchkin, shoot putty at the moon, wank

female	baste the beaver, butter the muffin, candle bashing, caress
masturbation	yourself/the kitty, check the foxhole, dunk the beaver, feed the bearded clam, flick the bean, floss the cat, grease the skillet, make the kitty purr, paddle the pink canoe, part the petals, polish the pearl, preheat the oven, roll the dough/the mink, skim the cream, sort the oysters, stir the cauldron, tickle the bearded clam, wake the butterfly

Along with the euphemisms referring to basic bodily functions, there is also a great number of euphemisms referring to sexual intercourse. Intercourse itself is probably the most common euphemism used for what is technically known as *coition* or *copulation* and informally as *making love* or *having sex*. The terms referring to sexual intercourse can be further divided into three somewhat overlapping sub-categories: the Latinate, the metaphoric, and the slangy (Rawson 148) (see Table 7). However, a pattern how to construct a euphemistic expression for a sexual intercourse exists as well: Berdoll notes that the designation for a sexual act is often preceded by an acquiring verb: *copping*, *fetching*, *getting*, *grabbing*, *having*, *nabbing*, *snatching*, *wanting*, and occasionally, *begging* for any noun used to specify the *female pudendum*, also known as *vajayjay*. Typical of these nouns are *ass*, *beaver*, *bob*, *booty*, *box*, *bull's eye*, *buns*, *bird*, *cat*, *cookie*, *crack*, *cranny*, *crotch*, *down*, *flesh*, *fur-pie*, *hole*, *honey-pot*, *jam*, *kitty*, *lap*, *milk*, *monkey*, *mouse*, *muff*, *naughty*, *nooky*, *oyster*, *poontang*, *pork*, *pussy*, *rump*, *snug*, *squirrel*, *twat*, *twittle*, and *you-know-what* (87). If the urgency of the situation calls for it, the use of a noun may be eliminated

altogether and one can just say *some* (*get some, have some, want some, etc.*) (Berdoll 88).

Table 7

Categorization of euphemisms for sexual intercourse (based on euphemisms listed by Berdoll, Calvo, Holder, Rawson and Tate)

the Latinate	carnal knowledge, carnal act, conjugal rights, break a commandment, <i>in coitu, coitu actus</i>
the metaphoric	act(ion), beast with two backs, bed and breakfast, business, congress, connection, conversation, deed, (amorous) favors, generation, green gown, intimacy, lie (with), linked with, occupy, relations, (consummate) relationship, (amatory) rites, service, sleep with, spend the night with
the slangy	bang, bump uglies, bury the bone, beat the gun, bonk, do it/the big nasty, go all the way, greens, glaze the doughnut, hide the salami, horizontal aerobics, hot meat injection, it, lay (some pipe), make (love), monkey business, park the pink mustang up a side street, roger, screw, shack up (with), take the skin boat to tuna town, wax that ass

Conclusion

Sexual euphemisms, just like other types of euphemisms, have, with certain social constraints loosened, entered our everyday language. They may have been



used as a way to avoid talking about certain matters, specifically linguistic taboos, in the past, but nowadays they are used for many different purposes. Their use is motivated from the wish or need to bypass the ban to avoid punishment to the innate human joy in verbal creativity, which could be seen from the sexual euphemisms used in this paper, and with no limits to human ingenuity in its endeavor to display or hide sexuality, many new sexual euphemisms will spring up into existence. The sexual euphemisms analyzed and illustrated in this paper may seem like a lot, but they are, really, just a sampling as only the euphemisms found in the printed literature were analyzed. Another plethora of sexual euphemisms exists online, so euphemisms like *Netflix and chill* are created every day on the Internet. Therefore, further analysis of sexual euphemisms on the Internet may produce interesting results about the type, form, and function of the sexual euphemism used online. While many new euphemisms prove to be nonce terms, those that are used and reused over a specific time period will be ratified as true euphemisms, and may last for generations, even centuries. It only remains to be seen if contemporary euphemisms, like *Netflix and chill*, will stand the test of time and become immortalized like Shakespeare's *beast with two backs*.

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