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AD HOC CONCEPTS AND EUPHEMISM TREADMILL:
A COGNITIVE-PRAGMATIC ACCOUNT

У статті аналізується прагматика евфемістичних ланцюгів з позицій когнітивно-прагматичної теорії релевантності. Робляться висновки щодо того, яким чином відбувається процес контамінації евфемізмів у дискурсі.

Ключові слова: прагматика, теорія релевантності, евфемізми, контамінація.

The article provides an analysis of euphemistic chains from the point of view of cognitive-pragmatic Relevance Theory. Conclusions are made regarding the way euphemisms become contaminated in discourse

Key words: pragmatics, relevance theory, euphemisms, contamination.

In the article euphemisms are analyzed in terms of ad-hoc concepts narrower in denotation than their lexically-encoded counterparts. I discuss whether lexicalization of such ad-hoc concepts is responsible for the taboo contamination of euphemisms.

According to Allan and Burridge [3], euphemisms are present in all known world languages and thus constitute a linguistic universal. This entails that most likely euphemistic strategies are natural abilities of human beings. If people in all known world cultures resort to euphemistic strategies, such strategies must be rooted in cognition and have to do with natural meaning-processing abilities, which cognitive pragmatics was designed to explain.

According to some researchers, the taboo-induced need for language change leads to a continuous turnover in vocabulary and as a result of this, linguistic innovations which are the products of this language change can be thought of as having 'careers' in the vernacular. Pinker [10] has characterized the career of a euphemism as a 'treadmill' that ultimately wears out the term when it becomes ubiquitous in text and discourse (cf. also Allan & Burridge [3]).

Similar observation is made by Allan & Burridge [4]: "(S)ome euphemisms are short-lived: time blows their cover. With the years they degenerate into dysphemisms through contamination by the taboo topic and they are then replaced. PC (politically correct, A.S.) language tramps the same treadmill…*African-American* now replaces *black* which earlier replaced *Negro* and *coloured*. And so it goes on; if society's prejudices continue to bubble away, the negative connotations soon reattach themselves" [4, 89].

Lexicographer Hugh Rawson [11] suggested that the career of a euphemism is limited by a linguistic incarnation of the economic principle known as Gresham's Law, whereby debased currency eventually drives full-value tokens out of circulation. Just as "bad money drives out the good" in a monetary system, Rawson argued that through frequent usage, euphemisms become tainted by their associations with distasteful topics. This process eventually drives them out of conversational circulation and leads to the creation of new euphemisms to replace them.

According to Senichkina [2, 128], in time euphemisms undergo 2 processes. They can either:

1) Become synonymous with the substituted units and thereby stop fulfilling their euphemistic function. Such euphemisms become direct nominations. Such changes take place due to social factors.

2) Contaminate their denotation as a result of linguistic factors. The nature of denotation of the tabooed linguistic unit determines the rate of euphemistic subtitutions. The more strictly tabooed a word or an expression is the sooner the contamination takes place.

B.A. Larin [1] discussed in his 1977 paper how taboo topics change historically and how different they are in various social groups. He argued that for euphemisms to enjoy a lasting career, it is important that they have a well-known dysphemistic counterpart in that vernacular. The loss of a rude or unacceptable equivalent drives the euphemism itself into the category of direct nominations and in that case a new substitute is required [1, 110]. Larin also noted that the more often a euphemism is used the quicker it loses its ameliorating capacity and the sooner it will require another euphemistic substitute for itself.

Euphemism turnover can indeed be quite high and as old euphemisms become taboo, new ones are invented to replace them. As this cycle continues it actually forces semantic change in the language [15]. Once a euphemism loses its euphemistic force and becomes a taboo term it is very rare for it to become acceptable again. While taboo may influence the loss of some lexical items, it also encourages the creation of euphemisms. By way of an example we can take the phrase 'juvenile delinquents' which from 1950s had been used to refer to adolescent criminals and recently was replaced by the allegedly improved value-free label 'conduct-disordered youth'. Similarly the dysphemistic 'crippled'

originally replaced by 'handicapped' and 'disabled', was subsequently changed to 'differently-abled', 'physically challenged', 'people with disabilities' and 'people who use a wheelchair'; 'old-age pensioners' became 'senior citizens' while 'old' itself has gradually been supplanted by 'elderly' (cf. [5, 146]).

The study by McGlone et al. [9] presents two competing views of the inferential mechanics underlying careers of euphemisms. With frequent use, a euphemism can become an easily recognizable, conventional label for the unpleasant topic it was coined to veil. Yet conventionality would seem to work against a euphemism's effectiveness in mitigating face threat. One is that the capacity to displace a distasteful topic deteriorates as euphemisms become conventional and thus 'contaminated' by their association with negative referents. According to this view familiarity of euphemisms appears to work against their effectiveness in mitigating face threat: if the literal label for an unpleasant topic has strong associations as to elicit negative affect upon its mere mention, wouldn't a euphemism that has itself become a conventional label for the topic have strong negative associations as well?

According to McGlone et al. [9] conventionality only improves euphemism's concealing capacity contrary to what was suggested by the proponents of the so-called 'associative contamination' hypothesis advanced by Allan & Burridge [4], Pinker [10], Rawson [11] etc.

One of the central issues discussed in research literature within the discipline of linguistic pragmatics is that the meaning a speaker communicates by uttering a sentence on a particular occasion typically goes well beyond the (context-independent) linguistic meaning assigned to that sentence by semantics. According to the theoretical framework of the cognitive psychological pragmatic account of communication known as Relevance Theory [12], which considers search for relevance to be the mechanism responsible for pragmatic enrichment of semantically underspecified content, hearers arrive at speaker-intended meanings guided by relevance-seeking nature of human cognition and the subconscious knowledge that every act of ostensive communication conveys the presumption of its optimal relevance.

Recent work by relevance-theorists within a relatively new discipline of lexical pragmatics advocates the view according to which lexical interpretation typically involves the construction of an *ad hoc concept* or occasion-specific sense, based on interaction among encoded concepts, contextual information and pragmatic expectations or principles. They offer a unified account on which lexical narrowing and broadening are the outcomes of a single inferential interpretive process wich fine-tunes the interpretation of almost every word.

Pragmatic narrowing is the use of a word to convey a more specific sense than the encoded one as in when DRINK* is contextually restricted, guided by pragmatic expectations or relevance, to the denotation 'alcohol', while broadening is the use of a word to convey a more general sense than the encoded one, with an expansion of the linguistically-specified denotation: i.e. the categorical extension Iraq is the new VIETNAM*. Thus, metaphorical use of 'chameleon' would be seen as involving an expansion from the category CHAMELEON to the category CHAMELEON*, which is lexically adjusted to include both actual chameleons and people who share with chameleons the encyclopaedic property of having the capacity to change their appearance in order to blend in with their surroundings [17].

Lexical adjustments is viewed in RT as a special case of a more general process of mutual parallel adjustment of explicitly and implicitly communicated content in which tentative hypotheses about contextual assumptions, explicatures and contextual implications are incrementally modified so as to yield an overall interpretation which satisfies the hearer's expectations of relevance. Both narrowirng and broaderning are viewed here as contributing to the truth-conditional content of utterances or in other words as being part of the proposition explicitly expressed by the utterance and not merely implicated. This unified account rejects the traditional distinction between literal and figurative meaning and claims that approximation, hyperbole and metaphor are not distinct natural kinds, requiring different interpretive mechanisms, but involve exactly the same inferential interpretive processes as are used for ordinary, literal utterances.

Similarly to other researchers (e.g. [8; 13]), Wilson and Carston [17] point out that pragmatic processes of broadening, narrowing and metaphorical extension play a major role in semantic change. Under RT account of lexical pragmatics, the resulting senses are all seen as outcomes of the frequent and widespread application to a particular lexical item of a single pragmatic process of ad hoc concept construction.

From the relevance-theoretic standpoint, processing of novel expression such as 'collateral damage' while trying to maximize relevance of the utterance, hearers create a partially inferable attributive phrasal ad hoc (occasion specific) concept COLLATERAL DAMAGE* from the encoded literal meaning of the string on a first encounter. This ad hoc concept is narrower in denotation than its lexically-encoded counterpart. The subsequent lexicalisation of such an ad hoc concept involves transfer of some associations or 'connotations' from the encyclopaedic entry of the lexicalised concept to its logical entry. In the case of euphemisms, it is negative taboo associations, which are more salient than other associations, that are transferred to the logical entry. As a result, the meaning of a word employed as a euphemism narrows to the taboo sense alone and thus contaminated word becomes regarded as a taboo term.

In interpreting novel expression, hearers will generate attributive ad hoc concepts, which can later develop into a salient conceptual entry in their cognitive systems. In order to become such, the ad hoc concept relies on the activation of the conventionalized previously used familiar terms, which are 'copied' onto a new ad hoc concept and this generates extra rhetorical effects, not achieved by the use of the older term they were coined to replace. Following a path of least

effort, hearers will start copying into the new concept logical and encyclopedic properties of the encoded concept until their expectations of relevance are satisfied, at which point they will stop. Thus, as a result of conceptual metaphoric mapping involved into the construction of the ad hoc concept AFRICAN AMERICAN*, all the negative connotations, associated with the previously used biased expressions it was coined to replace will be literally 'dragged' onto the new politically correct term, since the intended explicated meaning is to be found always in the metaphoric target, whatever the interaction pattern is.

According to this view, upon hearing a novel expression, hearers immediately realize that the linguistically encoded meaning and the meaning communicated by the speaker's use of this particular string of words differ. They treat the whole string as a semantic unit (single concept) to which they are to assign some content (a token). Only after hearers start accessing this token automatically as a result of frequent use on numerous occasions, does the new PC neologism become a cognitively stable, salient and well-understood concept. With enough exposure, the partially understood concept may develop into a well-understood concept-type (as opposed to a temporary token), which may be stored in the hearer's mental lexicon. Thus, the meaning of the PC neologism is only recognized and understood because the salient target concept is listed and activated in the hearer's mental lexicon. In other words, as the word becomes more and more entrenched through repeated usage, hearers will get more and more used to selecting particular areas in order to form ad-hoc concepts.

Guided by the principle of relevance addressees construct invited inferences (as part of ad hoc concept generation), the new lexeme acquires all the negative connotations of the salient one it has been coined to replace and the process repeats. The conventionalized pragmatic meanings are reanalyzed as semantic meanings as in the course of time inferences can become references in language use. The encyclopedic entries are activated in the construction of ad hoc concepts during the derivation of explicatures. Due to consideration of relevance (processing effort efficiency) salient concepts are accessed, activated (which in turn reinforces their saliency). Logical and encyclopedic information associated with them is copied onto the new ad hoc concept which generates cognitive effects not unlike that of the original concept, the novel expression were coined to replace.

This kind of "forced referencing" or "invited inferencing" arising "on the fly" in language use, which E.C. Traugott defines as a "cognitive <...> process by which pragmatic meanings come to be conventionalized and reanalyzed as semantic polysemies [13, 1], will, in turn, activate the terms initially used, in case of African-American, for slaves in the past, which will be attributed as a cultural property of the neologism. The presumption of relevance does not show hearers how to make such connections, however, it stimulates hearers to seek and construct them.

Euphemisms can be analyzed in terms of ad-hoc concepts narrower in denotation than their lexically-encoded counterparts and Walaszewska [18] argues that it is the lexicalization of such ad-hoc concepts that is responsible for the taboo contamination of euphemisms. For the author, the formation of euphemisms and their taboo contamination can be adequately described and explained in terms of lexical pragmatic processes of ad hoc concept formation, since, as observed by relevance theorists, such processes pervade human communication.

Walaszewska [18] claims it is the process of narrowing that underlies the creation and use of euphemisms since they involve the pragmatic construction of ad hoc concepts narrower in denotation than their lexically-encoded counterparts, which means that a word used as a euphemism does not convey the concept it encodes, but a contextdependent ad hoc concept whose meaning is more specific than that of the corresponding lexically-encoded concept. The subsequent lexicalisation of such an ad hoc concept involves transfer of some associations, connotations, etc. from the encyclopaedic entry of the lexicalised concept to its logical entry, where logical properties amounting to a proper definition of a concept are stored. In the case of euphemisms, it is negative taboo associations, which are more salient than other associations, that are transferred to the logical entry. As a result, the meaning of a word employed as a euphemism narrows to the taboo sense alone and thus contaminated word becomes regarded as a taboo term.

This kind of 'euphemism treadmil' also known as the 'associative contamination hypothesis' seems to apply to a rather limited number of case as many euphemisms and politically correct expressions do not appear to be subject to this process and, contrary to the initially appealing situation in which the words are continuously replaced in search of the 'right' nomination, which comports to Wałaszewska's analysis, and Giora's [7] claim that euphemistic and PC language is effective only when it is novel. Many of them (e. g. 'African-American' and 'black') in fact seem to successfully coexist as synonyms syncronically in discourse.

The vast number of terms for toilet: lavatory, w.c., toilet, restroom, loo, little boys/girls room, cloakroom and euphemistic phrases for using it such as: powder one's nose, pay a visit, freshen up and many more also seem to co-exist synchronically in the English language. It is interesting to note in this respect that direct nominations of stigmatized referents endure unchanged in the vernacular far longer than their euphemistic counterparts and are not subject to the process of treadmill the way euphemisms are. It appears that swear words and taboo phrases endure for a longer time than their euphemistic counterparts. Thus according to OED one of the strongest invectives in the English language 'cunt' has endured in the language since 1230.

Common to all accounts of associative contamination in euphemism are two implicit empirical claims. First, they imply that the 'face value' of a euphemism depreciates as it becomes conventional in discourse, and thus communicators' perceptions of a euphemism's politeness and its familiarity in the vernacular are negatively correlated. Familiarity is, on this view, the principal source of contamination that precipitates a euphemism's fall into disfavour.

Unfamiliar euphemisms should appear less contaminated than their familiar counterparts and thereby enjoy an advantage in politeness. Second, the associative contamination hypothesis implies that the attributional consequences of using a familiar euphemism are decidedly negative for a speaker. Specifically, a speaker who refers to a distasteful topic using a familiar (and hence contaminated) euphemism hazards being perceived as impolite and/or indifferent to the addressee's sensibilities. When the euphemism is highly conventional (e.g. 'use the bathroom'), it should not, according to this view, afford the speaker a discernible advantage in face value over the literal term 'urinate'.

Despite its intuitive appeal, the hypothesis is at odds with other generalizations regarding pragmatic phenomena in communication. Thus, the study by McGlone et al [9] argues against the so-called 'euphemism treadmill' or 'associated contamination' hypothesis and claims that if a euphemism is to succeed in reducing the communicative discomfort associated with a distasteful topic, it is imperative that it not call undue attention to itself. In this regard, euphemism succeeds as a discourse strategy in the same manner camouflage succeeds in its military mission by rendering its subject as inconspicuous as possible in the surrounding context. Although military euphemisms such as *collateral damage* and *neutralization* seem aloof and impersonal ways to refer to death, it is these very qualities that enabled them to blend so well into political discourse before they were noticed by critics of doublespeak.

Cliché euphemisms can be more effective in this regard than less conventional expressions, by virtue of the low demands they make on the addresse's attentional resources. According to McGlone et al. [9] they are processed in an inattentive, mindless fashion, which enables them to operate 'under the radar' in a way that less familiar euphemisms cannot.

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