

**Modalities of Verbal Mitigation in Literary Language:
Artful vs. Explicit Sexual Euphemism**
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Abstract

It is my purpose in this paper to provide an overview of two modalities of euphemism detected in the novels *The Rainbow* by D.H. Lawrence and *Yellow Dog* by Martín Amis, referred to as 'artful' and 'explicit euphemism', that account for the wide range of lexical possibilities to deal with the realm of sex while trying to avoid the coarse word. In this regard, I will be devoted to exploring the main linguistic patterns of these modes of verbal mitigation, namely their degree of ambiguity, lexical neutralization of the taboo, the metaphorical language they resort to, mitigating capacity and contextual relevance. The results obtained support the idea that the traditional concept of euphemism should be revised and extended, since the escape from the coarse word is by no means limited to vague or indirect references, as traditional scholarship claimed. In fact, an explicit and plain-spoken euphemism coexists with ambiguous and connotative references to sexual issues, as shown in the literary texts aforementioned.

1. Introduction

In order to soften the potential dangers of certain words considered too blunt or offensive to be used in the public domain, language users resort to euphemism, i.e. the process whereby the taboo is stripped of its most inappropriate or obscene overtones. Euphemism thus provides a way to speak about the unspeakable, about those concepts banned from polite discourse. Among them, sex has usually met the strongest interdiction, as people have traditionally felt reluctant to cope with the sexual taboo using straightforward terms.

However, sex has not been banished from communicative exchanges; rather, allusions of a different nature to this taboo have

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been pervasive over the course of time, even in the printed page, which is supposed to impose certain barriers to bawdy language. Indeed, in literary texts an explicit treatment of sex coexists with implicit and mild references to sexual issues with a common euphemistic aim: to avoid the startlingly coarse violation of the taboo. This recourse to explicit naming for sexual topics is, as Epstein (1985: 57) suggests, especially noteworthy in modern times, when the silence on sex has been replaced by undeviating references to the taboo.

In this regard, it seems necessary to adopt a more comprehensive view than the one traditionally followed in the study of euphemism, bearing in mind the diversity of references to the realm of sex encountered in fiction. It is then my purpose to explore two opposite modalities of euphemistic substitution, that I shall call 'artful' and 'explicit euphemism', via examples excerpted from *The Rainbow* by D.H. Lawrence (henceforth TR) and *Yellow Dog* by Martin Amis (henceforth YD), novels which clearly show the treatment that the subject of sex has received. This seems to prove an interesting enterprise, because whilst there is substantial body of research on sexual euphemism (Epstein, 1985; Allan and Burridge, 1991: 75-116; Chamizo Domínguez and Sánchez Benedito, 2000; Crespo Fernández, 2006a, among others), not much scholarly ink has been spilled over the modalities of verbal attenuation considered here. In fact, to the best of my knowledge, the explicit treatment of sex as a euphemistic modality has not been explored so far, and, apart from my own contributions to the subject (Crespo Fernández, 2006b: 75-77 and 2007: 147-150), only Allan and Burridge (1991: 210-220) have dealt with artful euphemism as a specific mode of mitigation in literary texts. In this paper I will thus be devoted to providing an overview of both euphemistic modalities in comparison and contrast.

2. Preliminary remarks. Scope and definitions

Euphemism does not always resort to indirect lexical alternatives which, thanks to the ambiguity between the linguistic sign and the taboo, are capable of mitigating the latter in a given phraseological context, as the traditional view of euphemism claimed. In fact, in actual communicative practice the palliative substitutes for

sexual topics display different characteristics, forming a continuum with overlapping specimens ranging from the most vague and connotative alternatives to undeviating and plain-spoken references. Take the following euphemistic substitutes for ‘copulate’:

- (1) All the rest was external, insignificant, leaving him alone with this girl he wanted to *absorb*.¹ (TR, 230)
- (2) Xan wanted to *go to bed* with his wife for two good reasons: she was his ideal and she was there. (YD, 139)

Despite the radically different nature of *absorb* and *go to bed*, both share a common euphemistic aim: to avoid a coarse term (the ‘four-letter word’ *fuck*) without leaving out the allusion to the taboo. *Absorb* in (1) illustrates the modality of verbal mitigation called *artful euphemism*, i.e. the euphemistic disguise relies on an ambiguous and connotative language. In (2) *go to bed* is an example of *explicit euphemism*, i.e. the substitute simply supposes an escape from the coarse word, as its reference to the taboo is quite obvious. This explicit treatment of sex, however, does not imply a dysphemistic approach to the taboo, since a coverup phrase like *go to bed* fulfils the main function of euphemism insofar as it avoids a linguistic item deemed unacceptable in social discourse. In what follows I shall cover the most common patterns of these euphemistic categories in further detail.

3. Linguistic patterns of artful and explicit euphemism

3.1. Degree of ambiguity

Ambiguity is the raw material of euphemism, as Del Teso (1998: 199) argues. Indeed, the ambiguity of euphemism suggests that there may be a distasteful concept underneath and permits the mitigation of the taboo. Nonetheless, the degree of ambiguity largely differs in the euphemistic modalities considered here, as illustrated below:

¹ Hereafter, the words or phrases to be highlighted in the examples will appear in italics.

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- (3) She passed away as on a dark wind, far, far away [...]. She *entered the dark fields of immortality*. (TR, 451)
- (4) ‘What’s that doing here?’ [...] ‘It helps me have an *orgasm*’.
(YD, 7)

Artful euphemism shows the highest degree of ambiguity; to such an extent that it may be difficult to recognize a sexual reference in (3), in which the metaphorical phrase *enter the dark fields of immortality* represents the taboo ‘reaching an orgasm’. By contrast, explicit euphemism presents a low degree of ambiguity, since the substitute and the taboo concept are so closely connected that the allusion to the sexual issue is evident; in fact, the literal meaning of the word usually coincides with its sexual sense, as happens with *orgasm* in (4).

3.2. Lexical neutralization of the taboo

According to Casas Gómez (1986: 35-36), lexical neutralization permits the suspension of the conceptual traits of a word considered inappropriate in a given communicative context. This process does occur in artful euphemism, as the substitute chosen to tone down the taboo moves away from its sexual meaning, reaching, by so doing, its lexical neutralization. Such is the case of *female flower* ‘female genitals’ in (5):

- (5) Here she would open her *female flower* like a flame, in this dimness that was more passionate than light. (TR, 304)

However, the explicit euphemistic phrase *between her legs* in (6) is totally unable to suspend the sexual overtones of its referent, given that it does not have any emotionally positive connotations with regard to the taboo (Chamizo Domínguez, forthcoming). Thus, rather than any attenuation of the taboo, it merely supposes a way to avoid a ‘four-letter word’ such as *cunt*:

- (6) It was in the *space between her legs* [...], that her gravity-centre lay. (YD, 66)

3.3. Use of figurative language

When explicit euphemism resorts to figurative language to carry out the substitution, it tends to employ a lexicalized metaphor, i.e. one in which the figurative sense is identified with its referent due to its intimate association with the distasteful thing that it names.²² Accordingly, the metaphorical item picks up the offensive connotations of the taboo and evokes the referent it was supposed to veil, in a sort of domino effect typical of euphemism (cf. BurrIDGE, 2004: 212-214; Crespo Fernández, 2007: 86-87). Hence *intercourse* in the quote below has lost its former metaphorical –and euphemistic– meaning (‘communication’), and refers to the taboo ‘copulation’ in an undeviating way:

- (7) [...] the Prince of Wales, as he then was, showed no more interest in sexual *intercourse* than he showed in polo or parachuting. (YD, 80)

On the contrary, artful euphemism employs metaphors in which the figurative sense has not been contaminated by its taboo, namely semilexicalized and novel metaphors:³

- (8) [...] she did not want any more the *fight*, the *battle*, as he, in his incontinence, still did. (TR, 129)
- (9) With subtle, instinctive economy, they went to the end of each kiss [...]. It was to be their final *entry into the source of creation*. (TR, 450)

² Following Marcus (cited in Pérez Hernández, 1997-1998: 217), this metaphorization is close to that employed in pornographic language, in which the use of metaphors is “unmetaphoric and literal”.

³ In this sense, Chamizo Domínguez and Sánchez Benedito (2000) consider three types of euphemisms: *lexicalized euphemisms* (those whose figurative meaning is regarded as usual); *semilexicalized euphemisms* (the substitute falls under a conceptual domain traditionally tied to the taboo); and *novel euphemisms* (the result of a creative association with the taboo accessible in its phraseological context). In the same vein, I proposed four types of metaphorical euphemism according to the degree of vinculation with the taboo: *explicit*, *conventional*, *novel* and *artful* euphemisms (Crespo Fernández, 2006a).

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In (8), *fight* and *battle* ‘copulation’ are semilexicalized euphemisms which respond to preexisting metaphorical associations deriving from the SEX-AS-VIOLENCE conceptual metaphor that form part of the reader’s cognitive system (cf. Lakoff, 1994: 210). For this reason, these terms are considered to be closer to the sexual referent than the novel metaphor *entry into the source of creation* in (9), in which the figurative meaning is not associated with the taboo of copulation whatsoever. In this example, as in (3) and (5), the author relies on the intrinsic ambiguity of novel metaphors to provide such an elegant disguise to the taboo as to verge on the poetic, in a proof of the metaphorical richness that Lawrence displays in his novels.

3.4. *Mitigating capacity*

Whereas explicit euphemism is unable to mitigate the sexual issue, due to its intimate association (in some cases, identification) with the taboo, the characteristic vagueness of artful euphemism allows for an effective mitigation of the sexual topic. Indeed, vagueness increases euphemistic force, as Burridge (2004: 224) argues. The different degree of euphemistic effectiveness can be seen below concerning the taboo of ‘sexual excitation’:

- (10) Ursula *felt her whole life begin* when Miss Inger came into the room. (TR, 336)
- (11) The spectacle *aroused* him – but not as much as the sound of He’s feet [...] coming closer. (YD, 120)

In (10), *feel one’s life begin* is a hyperbolic metaphor capable to mitigate the taboo because, at first glance, it has no points in common with the sexual topic, while in (11) *arousal*, in the very act of alluding to the sexual concept, calls it to mind and thus merely serves the writer’s purpose to avoid an overtly coarse language.

3.5. *Contextual relevance*

Artful euphemism, which unavoidably requires contextual aid to reduce its ambiguity in relation to the taboo, is a contextually-dependent phenomenon. Indeed, the reader must lean on contextual

clues to unravel the possible meanings of the substitute and, by so doing, arrive at the meaning intended by the euphemistic item;⁴ otherwise, it would be difficult to associate *baptism to another life* with ‘sexual pleasure’ in (12):

- (12) Their coming together now, after two years of married life, [...] was the *baptism to another life*, it was complete confirmation. (TR, 95)

However, the vast majority of explicit euphemisms, given their unambiguous nature, can be identified with the taboos they stand for regardless of context. This happens with learned terms like *cunnilingus* ‘oral sex’ (YD, 160) or *phallus* ‘penis’ (YD, 257) and with colloquial phrases – fixed in the lexicon with a sexual sense – such as *get into bed* (YD, 234) or *sleep with* (YD, 80), that evocate their sexual referents without contextual aid and with no processing effort.

What emerges from this, following the Theory of Relevance proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1995), is that explicit euphemism is more contextually relevant than artful euphemism, since the poetic substitute in (12) undoubtedly requires a greater effort on the part of the reader to comprehend its intended meaning than, for instance, *intercourse* in (7). In fact, as explicit euphemisms are so transparent and easy to recognize, the receiver understands the sexual concept quickly and thus stops processing at this first interpretation, satisfying his expectation of relevance.

4. Concluding remarks

The present paper has provided evidence that there exists a juxtaposition of both ambiguous and explicit allusions to the realm of sex, which accounts for the wide range of ways to cope with the sexual taboo in print. More precisely, the analysis of the modalities of sexual euphemism as encountered in the novels used as examples has revealed

⁴ The more ambiguous the euphemistic substitute, the more active the receiver must be in the process of interpretation, as Del Teso Martín (1998: 198-199) argues.

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different patterns of their linguistic behaviour which are summarised in the following table:

Table 1. Patterns of artful and explicit euphemism

ARTFUL EUPHEMISM	EXPLICIT EUPHEMISM
Ambiguous	Explicit
Lexical neutralization of the taboo	Taboo connotations
Novel / semilexicalized metaphors	Lexicalized metaphors
High mitigating capacity	Low mitigating capacity
Non-contextually relevant	Contextually relevant

The above patterns are mutually dependent and coexist in the euphemistic substitutes belonging to one category or the other. Nonetheless, all the lexical alternatives for sexual issues do not obviously display these features in the same degree, since the discursive value of the euphemistic items ultimately depends on pragmatic issues which, for the sake of imposing limitations, have not been analysed in depth here (see Crespo Fernández, 2007: 119-143 for details).

To conclude, in the light of this article, it seems evident that the traditional concept of euphemism as the substitution of taboo words by means of vague and indirect alternatives should be subject to revision. Indeed, sexual euphemism as shown in literary texts moves away from the traditional approach to the phenomenon, and an explicit and plain-spoken euphemism coexists with ambiguous and connotative sex-related references. Clearly, this is a consequence of the current permissiveness of sex in public discourse, as this taboo is no longer felt as unacceptable as it used to be. In fact, the representation of sex in non-pornographic fiction has been gradually increasing since the 1970s onwards, a trend which should contribute to adopt a more comprehensive approach to euphemism than the one followed in traditional scholarship.

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