Euphemisms in Racial Discourse : A study of linguistic softening in modern media

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Abstract

This B.A.thesis explores the use of euphemisms by political authorities and mass media through the lens of critical discourse analysis and, more broadly, the sociolinguistic perspective. I have examined how euphemisms used by political figures and the mainstream media shape public perception and reinforce social biases. Through a series of case studies, I analyze the implications of common euphemisms used to refer to the black community, highlighting how such language perpetuates stereotypes and instills fear within society. A key focus of this study is Donald Trump's rhetoric during the COVID-19 outbreak, specifically his speech that contributed to the rise of anti-Asian sentiment. This analysis shows how strategic word choice by influential figures can incite hate and division. Additionally, this thesis explores how mainstream media's portrayal of the black community through selective language reinforces negative stereotypes, thereby influencing readers' attitudes. The findings emphasize the broader societal dangers of uncritically accepting the language used by political leaders and media without deeper inquiry, underscoring the need for greater public awareness of the power of language.

Keywords: euphemisms, political authorities, mass media, critical discourse analysis, sociolinguistic perspective, public perception, social bias, case studies, black community, stereotypes, anti-Asian sentiment, selective language, societal dangers, power of language

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1. INTRODUCTION

A euphemism is the substitution of an agreeable expression for one that could potentially offend or suggest something unpleasant[1]. The primary functions of euphemisms are to show respect, avoid offending someone, soften or downplay a situation, or refer to taboo subjects. Euphemisms in everyday life are mostly used when referring to death, religion, sex, or war. For example, using an expression *putting a dog down* softens the original meaning of the verb *to euthanize.* Another example is the phrase *visit from Aunt Flo* to refer to menstruation or saying that someone is *in a better place* instead of saying they died. However, euphemism is a complex linguistic device with other functions in society that are not always advantageous. In the world of political leaders and modern media, euphemisms are likely to contain elements of ambiguity, indirectness, metaphor, and deception. They have a potential to become a powerful tool for those who know how to use them to their advantage, although sometimes they can be misinterpreted due to their indirect, multifunctional, and sometimes metaphorical nature. [2]Since euphemisms are used to soften the original, direct meaning of a concept, they are also related to concepts of naming, political correctness, and media framing. My thesis begins with a theoretical framework of the various functions of euphemisms. I continue with the theory of political correctness and media framing. Next, I delve into euphemistic language regarding the Asian American community in the speech of President Donald Trump after the global outbreak of coronavirus. Through direct quotes from President Trump regarding COVID-19, I explore the impact that his linguistic choices had on the rise of discrimination, hate crimes, and the decline in the number of visits to Asian restaurants. Furthermore, I examine euphemistic labels that frequently carry negative connotations and are often associated with the Black community. I continue by analyzing data regarding the black defendants' media coverage and provide a linguistic analysis of a few case studies containing euphemistic elements. In conclusion, my thesis provides a summary of the key findings discussed and presents a hypothesis regarding the future dynamics between authorities, the media, and global conflicts.

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[1] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/euphemism

[2] https://typely.com/blogs/entry/8-euphemisms-comforting-or-deceitful/

2. EUPHEMISMS IN THE MILITARY LANGUAGE

Euphemisms are often used in the military language; one of the most frequent examples is *military intervention* when referring to war or using *enhanced interrogation* instead of torture.[3] Jespersen observed the accumulation of World War I euphemisms specifically referring to death; in the nuclear age, the most frequent usage of euphemisms for death and killing is collateral damage[4]. It is a term adopted by the US military in the 20th century. The USAF Intelligence Targeting Guide defines the term as "unintentional damage or incidental damage affecting facilities, equipment, or personnel, occurring as a result of military actions directed against targeted enemy forces or facilities".[5](https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/97000.html)

Lawrence (1973) argues that euphemisms have long been closely linked to both military and political deception. For instance, terms like "liquidation" are employed as a substitute for "killing," and "separate development" is used in place of "racial apartheid." (Lawrence,1973).[6] Military euphemisms are closely related to political euphemisms because they are used often by politicians to describe an ongoing war. It is not unexpected to assume political leaders will use language to manipulate the situation to their advantage and represent war in a glorifying manner.

According to Watts(2013), ethnic cleansing is "possibly the most notorious euphemism to be employed in recent military history." The phrase, which is a euphemistic substitution for genocide is associated with the Serbo-Croatian war which coined the phrase "etničko čiščenje", [1]which, according to the definition is the intentional and organized extermination of a group of people based on their ethnicity, nationality, religion, or race.[7](https://www.britannica.com/topic/genocide)

[3] [3] https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/enhanced-interrogation-explained/

[4]Chilton, Paul. "METAPHOR, EUPHEMISM AND THE MILITARIZATION OF LANGUAGE." Current Research on Peace and Violence, vol. 10, no. 1, 1987, p.13. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40725053. Accessed 17 Aug. 2024

[5] https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/97000.html

[6] Mironina, A. Y., & Porchesku, G. V. (2023). Euphemism as a linguistic strategy of evasion in political media discourse. Research Result. Theoretical and Applied Linguistics, 9(2), 4-18. https://doi.org/10.18413/2313- 8912-2023-9-2-0-1

[7] https://www.britannica.com/topic/genocide

[1] https://legionmagazine.com/euphemisms-acronyms-and-outright-lies-the-language-of-war/

3. EUPHEMISMS IN THE WORLD OF BUSINESS

When discussing someone's socioeconomic status, employment, or unemployment, people are often cautious in making linguistic choices. Nowadays, anything that is in the realm of the business world is a sensitive topic. Euphemisms exist not only to refer to low-income citizens but also to those of wealthy status. For example, implying that someone is well off or is living comfortably means that they are rich. In addition, there is also frequent usage of expressions such as affluent, economically advantaged, or financially secure. These terms convey the proper meaning, but without praising or mocking rich people. On the other hand, referring to the poor as economically disadvantaged or underprivileged is a respectful way to describe someone's socioeconomic status. Similarly, when an employee „gets fired", they will regularly say they got laid off or let go. If they are unable to find a job for a longer period, they will likely say they are between jobs. The former examples are frequently used to exercise politeness and professionalism in the business world.[8]

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8   https://languageonlineservices.com/2020/02/35-business-euphemisms/

4. THE FUNCTIONS OF EUPHEMISMS

4.1. The main functions

(Hughes,2000) classified the functions of euphemism into 5 parts:[9]

The polite function is used to avoid making people feel unpleasant. People tend to use vague language not to hurt someone's feelings. Instead of saying a friend died, people will often use a phrase like *they are in a better place*. Another example would be to say that someone is *not the sharpest pencil in the toolbox*, instead of saying they are unintelligent. Euphemisms are often expressed through playful phrases to lighten the conversation and distract the interlocutors from the original intended meaning. In this way, the unintelligent person will likely laugh at this remark, rather than be offended.

The covering- up function -politicians and news media use euphemisms to cover up the facts of some events to make the politics, economy, and military more steady. Instead of referring to it as war, newspapers might present it as military intervention. Another example is associated with racially motivated murders, which are often described as officer-involved shootings to protect the authorities. Euphemistic substitution for bribe is *soft commission*, and torture is often depicted as *enhanced interrogation*.

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https://www.researchgate.net/publication/351513359_Exploring_the_Use_of_Euphemisms_in_some_Speeches_of_President_Obama_a_Pragmatic_Study

The inducing function - Euphemisms are used to persuade the target. Airline companies use deluxe or premium class to replace first class, so the second class becomes first class, and the third class is presented as business or tourist class. For example, in their campaign to promote an anti-aging cream, Olay used slogans such as *Give mature skin the extra care it deserves*, thus replacing the semantics of biological decay (old) with maturity, defined as 'the state of being mentally and emotionally well-developed, and therefore responsible' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019). The phrase "Join me in the battle against aging" is also a euphemism, as it softens the potentially negative connotations of aging by pairing it with the more uplifting metaphor of fighting back. Another example is Tampax's slogan, "Maybe these colors will distract you from the hell you are going through," which uses humor to downplay the discomfort being referenced.[10] This slogan is appealing to women because of irony and humor, but also the use of the word *hell* in this context implies that there is understanding and empathy of what a woman endures during the menstrual cycle.

The tactical function :

This function is practiced to soften potentially uncomfortable scenarios or topics that make people uneasy. For example, a vomit bag in the airplane is named *a bag for motion discomfort*.

The humorous function :

Humor is often used as a coping mechanism in everyday life. Humorous implications tend to be euphemistic because they subtly hint at a situation, aiming to address a delicate topic gently and shield the listener from emotional unease. People use *push- up daisies* to replace *be buried* because the former words can reduce people's negative feelings associated with death.

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Danilina, E. A., Kizyan, E. E., & Maksimova, D. S. (2019). Euphemisms in advertising discourse: Putting on a positive face and maintaining speech etiquette. Training, Language and Culture, 3(1), 8-22. https://doi.org/10.29366/2019tlc.3.1.1

4.2. The function of political correctness

Euphemisms can often be used by authorities who manipulate and mask the situation for their gain. In this way, euphemisms are no longer softer versions of everyday concepts, but acquire another function that ultimately has larger effects and consequences in society. In the modern world, euphemism is a fundamental device in ideological discourse.[11]A person in authority has the opportunity to use linguistic choices which ultimately impact the entire nation. The president of a state is a person who has complete power over the nation that chooses to trust, follow, and obey the beliefs of that figure. In addition, mass media is an organization that can portray a real-life story in its way. When journalists report on everyday situations, they convey a message that is consciously or unconsciously supported by their beliefs, ideologies, and opinions.

Euphemisms are closely related to naming, political correctness, and cultural sensitivity. The concept of political correctness has evolved significantly over time, with its origins rooted in various ideological frameworks. Political correctness was initially associated with communist doctrine; it referred to following *the right thoughts* and doing the *right actions* as prescribed by those in power. This notion was not exclusive to communist regimes; it was also enforced under the totalitarian rule of Nazi Germany, where the "*right opinions*" were essential for pursuing journalism. In the 1970s, political correctness entered the American public discourse, particularly in the academia, where it was used by social activists as a form of self-critical satire. These activists employed the term to make fun of their desire to avoid offending others.

In 1991, President George H. W. Bush criticized the concept in his commencement address at the University of Michigan, expressing concerns that political correctness, while arising from a desire to eliminate language that oppresses different races, sexes, or nationalities, was potentially replacing old prejudices with new ones. Bush warned that the movement's tendency to restrict certain topics, expressions, and gestures could lead to an over- censorship that might limit intellectual growth and open discourse.

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[11] Chilton, Paul. "METAPHOR, EUPHEMISM AND THE MILITARIZATION OF LANGUAGE." *Current Research on Peace and Violence*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1987, p.14., *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40725053. Accessed 17 Aug. 2024.

In the modern world, political correctness is defined as the avoidance of language and actions that could offend or exclude socially disadvantaged groups. The scope of what is considered politically correct has broadened. For instance, the "OK" hand gesture, which traditionally signified approval, has been reinterpreted as a symbol of white power, demonstrating how gestures can be perceived differently based on context.

In addition,liberal-leaning Western media outlets have increasingly adopted policies sensitive to race, ethnicity, and religion. However, this sensitivity sometimes leads to the avoidance of themes that might offend minority groups or negatively impact public perceptions of them. While politically correct language can promote respect and inclusivity, it also poses challenges. Discriminatory language, as evidenced by historical examples like Nazi propaganda, reinforces societal inequalities by dehumanizing targeted groups through derogatory terms. Speakers must navigate a limit between promoting respectful communication and avoiding the consequences of censorship that limit meaningful dialogue and intellectual growth.

Moreover, while speakers are responsible for the meaning of their messages, they cannot control how their words are interpreted or misinterpreted. Efforts to clarify and denounce discriminatory interpretations are crucial, but there is always a risk that well-intentioned messages can be distorted to support harmful agendas. This highlights the complex dynamics between language, power, and societal values, emphasizing the need for careful and thoughtful communication.[12]

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[12] Lai, Amy. "Political Correctness, Harassment/Discrimination/Hate Speech, Microaggression." In Defense of Free Speech in Universities: A Study of Three Jurisdictions, University of Michigan Press, 2023, pp. 81–115. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.11442022.9. Accessed 17 Aug. 2024.

4.3. The function of media framing

Framing, a concept first introduced by E. Goffman in 1974, refers to the organization and presentation of messages and information. According to Gamson (1989), framing involves analyzing news stories for a better understanding of how reporting influences public perceptions of worldly events. The theory of framing suggests that frames impact all aspects of news reporting, from the practices within a news organization to broader cultural attitudes surrounding the subject matter. These frames not only shape public perception but are also influenced by prevailing societal values, making the concept both complex and deeply interconnected, as discussed by Kuypers (2009). In news reporting, framing involves several key elements: defining the problem, identifying its cause, making moral judgments, and proposing solutions (Kuypers, 2009). While the primary focus of news organizations remains on delivering media content, framing the story holds a close second in importance (Seals, 2021). Kuypers (2009) further elaborates that frames lead us to perceive the world in specific ways by highlighting certain aspects of our multidimensional reality while downplaying others. Hallahan(2009) argues that framing influences cognitive processing by selectively activating particular memory nodes or schemas to interpret a message. Hallahan (2009) identifies seven framing models relevant to public relations: situations, attributes, choices, actions, issues, responsibility, and news. The way events and news are framed in mass media ultimately shapes how audiences understand these events. The construction of frames is influenced by various factors, including ideology, professional norms, stereotypes, moral values, and gender concepts, which all contribute to how journalists frame their coverage. Mass media serve not only as instruments of cultural dominance but also as reflections of ideological language that manipulate public consciousness. The primary function of the media is to frame information from a desired ideological perspective. Euphemisms, as described by Brekle (1989), act as a form of semantic camouflage, serving as tools for ideological framing.[13]

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[13] Seals, Katrina D. (2021) "Framing Theory: A Textual Analysis of News Coverage of the Breonna Taylor Killing," McNair Scholars Research Journal: Vol. 14, Article 9.
Available at: https://commons.emich.edu/mcnair/vol14/iss1/9

5. EUPHEMISTIC LANGUAGE REGARDING ASIAN AMERICANS

In March 2020, when the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus took place, the president of the United States of America, Donald Trump, addressed the event in his speech. His remarks regarding the virus made an impact on the nation's perceptions of Asian Americans and additionally initiated the discriminatory behavior of the Western nation toward the Asian community[14]. British spies first considered there was only a *remote* chance that the virus had leaked from the laboratory. However, there had been a reassessment after which a lab escape was thought *feasible* by Western intelligence agencies. US diplomatic sources expressed concerns that the world could once again be lab away from the next *spillover* if the origin is not revealed[15].On March 11th, 2020, Donald Trump referred to COVID-19 as a *foreign virus.* He then stated that by continuing to take tough measures, the US will *reduce the threat to citizens*. In these sentences, *foreign* and *threat* are euphemistic, because their role is to represent the issue of COVID-19 to the entire nation and world in a particular way. When naming the virus *foreign,* Trump consciously distances the US from the issue and associates the virus entirely with the Asian community. Consequently, the majority of US citizens view the virus as originating from Asian countries and disregard the matter as a global issue. Labeling COVID-19 as *a threat to the citizens* is a political strategy that places the blame entirely on Asian nations and ignores the rapid spread of the virus in the US. On March 18th, he announced closing the borders from China and used the adjective *Chinese t*o describe the virus and a year after, publicly named it *Kung Flu.* Another euphemism Trump used to refer to the disease is the *invisible enemy.* In this euphemistic and metaphorical framing, the U.S. is portrayed as fighting a battle against an invisible enemy that endangers American lives and threatens to devastate the nation. The speaker downplayed the potential harsh realities of the war against COVID-19, such as deaths, infections, and economic collapse, while emphasizing the prospect of a great victory.

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[14] Olimat, Sameer. *Words as Powerful Weapons: Dysphemism in Trump's Covid-19 Speeches*. 2020. *ResearchGate*, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sameer-Olimat/publication/344427814_Words_as_Powerful_Weapons_Dysphemism_in_Trump's_Covid-19_Speeches/links/5f744781299bf1b53e002586/Words-as-Powerful-Weapons-Dysphemism-in-Trumps-Covid-19-Speeches.pdf. Accessed 26 Aug. 2024.

[15] https://archive.ph/WQ9po

Donald Trump's choice of words initiated hate crimes, discrimination, and cyberbullying toward Asian Americans. [16]The notion of "uncleanness" has been used through history to oppress minority groups and justify their expulsion. For example, European Jews being blamed for the bubonic plague in the Middle Ages, or immigrants crossing the southern U.S. border being referred to as "diseased." Privileged groups have frequently leveled such accusations against minority populations. Contemporary views on disease threats are often intertwined with anti-immigration attitudes. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Stop AAPI Hate, an advocacy group monitoring anti-Asian violence in America, reported almost 3,800 incidents of hate between mid-March 2020 and February 2021. Chinese restaurants experienced a significant decline in visits compared to non-Asian restaurants, with Republican-leaning news outlets, like Fox News, more likely to blame China for the pandemic. Areas with stronger support for Trump saw a larger decline in visits to Chinese restaurants than areas with less support for Trump. Research indicated that Asian restaurant traffic fell by 18.4% after the onset of COVID-19. When assessing consumer blame for the pandemic, 27% of respondents in the first survey wave identified Asians as the group most responsible for bringing the coronavirus to the U.S. In the second wave, this figure dropped to 17%, but in the fourth wave in 2021, 38% blamed Chinese people for the pandemic. Among Biden voters, 12% blamed Asian people and 32% blamed Chinese people, while among Trump voters, 27% blamed Asian people and 56% blamed Chinese people.[17]. During the COVID-19 crisis, Chinese restaurants experienced a substantial decline in visits relative to non-Asian restaurants. These portrayals were not spread evenly across the population—Republican-leaning news outlets, such as Fox News, were more likely to blame China for the pandemic compared with other outlets. areas with greater support for Trump would see a larger relative decrease in visits to Chinese restaurants compared with areas with lower support for Trump. Research found that, during the period after the onset of COVID-19, Asian restaurant traffic decreased by a substantial 18.4%. The assessment of consumer blame for pandemic spread was done by asking American respondents which racial or ethnic group is most responsible for bringing coronavirus into the US. In the first wave, 27 % of respondents answered Asians, while in the second wave, 17% reported Asians as the most responsible for pandemic spread. In the fourth wave, in 2021, 38% answered blamed Chinese people for the pandemic spread. While 12 % of Biden voters blamed Asian people, 27% of Trump voters blamed Asian people.[19]

[16] Olimat, Sameer. Words as Powerful Weapons: Dysphemism in Trump's Covid-19 Speeches. 2020. ResearchGate, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sameer-Olimat/publication/344427814_Words_as_Powerful_Weapons_Dysphemism_in_Trump's_Covid-

19 Speeches/links/5f744781299bf1b53e002586/Words-as-Powerful-Weapons-Dysphemism-in- Trumps-Covid-19-Speeches.pdf. Accessed 26 Aug. 2024

[17] https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-022-01493-6
[19] https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-022-01493-6

Between March 19 and August 5, 2020, over 30% percent of the incidents included a perpetrator using anti-Chinese language similar to President Trump's, like "Wuhan virus," "Chinese Virus," and "Kung Flu." The terms employed by the President racialized the disease in a way that was not considered a biological phenomenon, but one that was entirely ethnically based, and served to oppress Chinese Americans and label them as disease carriers. In addition to the scapegoating of China and racist characterizations of the Chinese nation, the rhetoric included in the incidents involved virulent animosity, anti-immigrant nativism, and racial slurs.[20] Over the past three years, racism associated with coronavirus has made a significant impact on Asian Americans' mental health. One in five members of the Asian American community displayed racial trauma, which is defined as the psychological harm caused by racism, with characteristics similar to post-traumatic stress disorder.[21]

The anti-Asian sentiment was also evident in American immigration policies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that sought to prevent the supposed harms of the "yellow peril" and "dusky peril"[22].The best example of the so-called *oriental problem* is the Pacific Coast race riots of 1907. The riots' second consequence was that Canada, the United States, and the British Empire all focused attention more squarely on the international aspect of the "Asiatic issue," thereby uniting "white men's countries" together against the "Yellow Peril."[2]

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[20] Kulkarni, Manjusha P. "Stopping AAPI Hate: COVID-19 Related Racism and Discrimination Against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, Its Origins, Our History and Avenues for Redress." *Asian Pacific American Law Journal*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2023, p.83. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/48743279. Accessed 27 Aug. 2024.

[21] Kulkarni, Manjusha P. "Stopping AAPI Hate: COVID-19 Related Racism and Discrimination Against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, Its Origins, Our History and Avenues for Redress." *Asian Pacific American Law Journal*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2023,p.84. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/48743279. Accessed 27 Aug. 2024.

[22] Kulkarni, Manjusha P. "Stopping AAPI Hate: COVID-19 Related Racism and Discrimination Against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, Its Origins, Our History and Avenues for Redress." *Asian Pacific American Law Journal*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2023, p.86.*JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/48743279. Accessed 27 Aug. 2024.

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[2] Kulkarni, Manjusha P. "Stopping AAPI Hate: COVID-19 Related Racism and Discrimination Against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, Its Origins, Our History and Avenues for Redress." Asian Pacific American Law Journal, vol. 26, no. 1, 2023, p.83. JSTOR, https://www.jstor.org/stable/48743279. Accessed 27 Aug. 2024.

According to the Census Bureau, Asian is defined as "a person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam" (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2018). There are complex definitions of Asian and Asian American as the U.S./Western-centric, simplistic, unified, and monolithic identity markers that are historically rooted in colonialism and imperialism (Eguchi, 2013; Nakayama, 2004; Sekimoto, 2014). These umbrella terms are often strategically deployed to liberal essentialism and multiculturalism which obscure meaningful cultural nuances and ethnic differences in the U.S. According to the dictionary, an umbrella term is an expression that unifies related items, words, phrases, topics, or functions under one term.[3]

The idea of yellow peril emerged and became popularized by Western societies in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Eguchi & Ding, 2017). As the term yellow peril explicitly indicates, it means the peril or danger of the yellow race (Kawai, 2005). Specifically, yellow peril is a racial stereotype that generally refers to the West's fear of the yellow race. Because of the large population in East Asia, the potential economic power in China, and the rise of imperial power in Japan around the 1880s, the yellow race became a cultural, political, economic, and military threat to the White race in Western societies. Asians are considered forever foreigners (Tuan, 1998) or inassimilable Others who "would eventually overtake the nation and wreak social and economic havoc" (Fong, 2002, p. 189).[23]

[3] https://www.dictionary.com/browse/umbrella-term

While an average person might easily "misspeak" and be misunderstood, someone with a high level of education and a powerful position, such as Donald Trump, cannot claim to do so unconsciously. His words are deliberate and tactical, and he is aware of their impact, particularly on people whose votes he already has secured. When someone with a platform and the attention of not just the nation but the entire world speaks, every word they say is scrutinized and analyzed in detail. Therefore, each expression carries significant weight.

Rather than accepting the COVID-19 pandemic as a collective global problem and working towards preventing further spread, Trump's use of euphemisms exacerbates the situation by shifting the blame onto a single nation and undermines international relations. Careless language hinders relationships with other countries and easily leads to polarization of opinions, divisions, and potential conflicts. In situations like a global pandemic, it is crucial to calm the public and inspire them positively. Attacking a nation based on something that is not scientifically proven only generates greater panic and, of course, fosters the creation of prejudiced views that Asians are a threat to the Western world.

In the case of COVID-19, all wordly leaders ought to have prioritized swift prevention, quarantine measures, and ultimately, vaccination. Collective efforts are essential: Trump's failure to recognize the issue as a collective global challenge hinders the process of virus prevention.

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[23] Kimura, K. (2021). "Yellow Perils," Revived: Exploring Racialized Asian/American Affect and Materiality Through Hate Discourse over the COVID-19 Pandemic. Journal of Hate Studies, 17(1), 133–145. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33972/jhs.194

6. EUPHEMISTIC LABELS FOR THE BLACK COMMUNITY

6.1. *African Americans*

The word African-American was coined as a euphemism; it was promoted in the second half of the twentieth century by a movement led by the Reverend Jesse Jackson "to shift the definition of the group from the racial description of black to a cultural and ethnic identity that ties the group to its continent of origin and fosters dignity and self-esteem." [24]

However, a word or expression is not euphemistic or dysphemistic on its own, as it only plays that role depending on the context and the speaker's intentions. Due to this, the euphemistic or dysphemistic quality of a word can never be considered as an intrinsic quality of the word regardless of context. According to Reverend Jackson, the term African American holds cultural integrity and puts African Americans in a proper historical context. This point of view was initiated to eradicate the term *black*, as it focuses solely on skin color. On the other hand, a professor at Northwestern University Watkins-Hazes claims that African-American is nation-specific as it refers to black people who were born in the United States.[25] Today, there are some Americans who identify as both, and some who prefer black over African American because they cannot trace their lineage.

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[24] https://face2faceafrica.com/article/heres-a-brief-look-at-the-origin-of-the-term-african-american

[25] https://www.cbsnews.com/news/not-all-black-people-are-african-american-what-is-the-difference/

6.2. *Urban*

Urban renewal is defined as the targeted effort to revitalize and enhance areas within a city that are inadequately developed or neglected[4]. In Lubbock, Texas, 3% of the population was non-white, but all of the 1,300 families that were displaced because of urban renewal projects were people of color. The policy brought positive developments such as office buildings, shopping centers, and entertainment centers, but those who benefited were mostly wealthy suburbanites.[26]

According to McEvoy (2020), urban radio played a key role in the civil rights movements of the 1960s, rallying audiences to attend protests and introducing budding black musicians to a larger audience. Over time, "urban" began to be used about nearly all black artists and black radio, but despite its rapid antiquation as musicians expanded into new genres and styles, some black radio executives were reluctant to eliminate the word because it was easier to sell advertising spots to companies using the term "urban" rather than black.

In 2018, an executive at Kobalt Music group, Sam Taylor said he despises the word because it means low-income and unsafe. He also states that saying urban music to him means that it needs to be rebuilt.

Tyler the Creator won a Grammy for Best Rap Album in 2020, and despite acknowledging his win, he criticized the world for always putting people of color in the rap or urban category and never recognizing them for the Best Album.[27]

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[26] https://www.fastcompany.com/90155955/the-racist-roots-of-urban-renewal-and-how-it-made-cities-less-equal

[27] https://www.forbes.com/sites/jemimamcevoy/2020/06/10/heres-how-urban-a-term-plagued-by-racial-stereotypes-came-to-be-used-to-describe-black-musicians/

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[4] https://planningtank.com/urbanisation/urban-renewal

6.3. *Thug*

By definition, a thug is a brutal ruffian or assassin[28]. According to a professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University, John McWhorter (2015), the word originated in India and came to English when the British ran India. Today, thug is used to refer to black people without directly naming them with a slur. A thug in black people's speech is somebody who is a ruffian but being a ruffian is displaying a healthy sort of countercultural initiative, displaying a kind of resilience in the face of racism, etc. Whenever white people use the word thug, they mostly refer to black people ruining neighborhoods. According to Mcworther(2015), if black men grew up not viewing the police as the enemy and instead feeling protected by the authorities, then the country would start turning a corner on race.[29]

President Donald Trump has developed a harsh vocabulary list for those involved in the Black Lives Matter protests, calling them everything from "terrorists" and "anarchists" to "thugs".

According to Triminko Melancon(2020), who is a professor of African American and American literary and cultural studies at Rhodes College, a *thug* is a coded and racialized term that people use instead of Black or brown. These labels have particular layers and certain notions already embedded in them, so when people hear that they know what it means. Melancon also said these words paint protesters not as peaceful demonstrators, law-abiding people, or patriots who are exercising their First Amendment rights, but as an enemy of the state. He stated that the choice of words is strategic and used to undermine the movement for racial justice and civil rights by creating a particular narrative of resistance, disturbance, and even criminality.

Finally, Melancon(2020) added that people who read newspaper articles regarding the protests initially feel sympathetic because they see images of people being shot in the streets with impunity. However, when the narrative changes, they automatically shift perspective and see the protesters as dangerous and guilty of civic disturbance.[30]

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[28] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/thug

[29] https://www.npr.org/2015/04/30/403362626/the-racially-charged-meaning-behind-the-word-thug

[30] https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/not-accident-false-thug-narratives-have-long-been-used-discredit-n1240509

6.4. *Ghetto*

Before it became a symbol of run-down and crime-ridden black segregated areas or *inner cities,* the term was originally connected to Jewish urban quarters. In 1516, when several people insisted that Venice should be solely populated by Christians, the city isolated the Jewish population to a little island – *the New Ghetto.* Meanwhile, African Americans had begun employing the term "ghetto" to refer to their residential segregation as early as the 1910s, at a time when several American cities were passing zoning ordinances that prohibited black people from living on blocks where the majority of residents were white. The term usually applies to sections of cities where minority groups are confined by segregation policies, physical barriers, or socioeconomic factors such as restricted educational opportunities or low-paying jobs[31]. The African-American psychologist Kenneth Clark's 1965 book *Dark Ghetto* connected "ghetto" with blacks in the mainstream media. For Clark (2019) the darkness of the "dark ghetto" was evident not only in the skin color of its inhabitants but in the fact that he saw such areas as bleak, desperate places, devoid of faith in a better future and awash in self-destructive behavior and social vices.[32]

Even as the word "ghetto" has come today to be perceived first and foremost as part of the African American experience, its usage is still not without controversy. Some view "ghetto," especially when used colloquially as an adjective meaning deviant or tawdry, as slanderous and racist.[33] According to Schwartz(2020), an associate professor of history and director of Columbian College's Judaic Studies Program proposed a series of antitheses for the term: it stands for both oppression and resilience, segregation and authenticity, or symbol of bigotry and synonym for home, depending on who defines it.[34]

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[31] https://magazine.columbian.gwu.edu/2020/07/02/ghetto-chronicling-a-words-tortured-history/

[32] https://time.com/5684505/ghetto-word-history/

[33] https://time.com/5684505/ghetto-word-history/

[34] https://magazine.columbian.gwu.edu/2020/07/02/ghetto-chronicling-a-words-tortured-history/

6.5. Officer-involved shooting

A lexicographer of the New Words Committee at the American Dialect Society, which uses databases of digital newspapers to discover new words, stated that the phrase officer-involved shooting rose greatly after 1971. In a New York Times column, Wesley Lowery(2020) called the phrase clunky euphemism which is used to uphold journalism's constant objectivity myth. An example of the used phrase is found in the New York Times: "An armed man who entered a Southern California church in between Masses died on Sunday after an officer-involved shooting, the authorities said." The emphasis in the story is on the armed man, considering that it is at the beginning of the sentence.[35] In this headline, the significance of the "officer-involved shooting" is downplayed and framed as a minor detail. The use of the verb "died" is also noteworthy, as it obscures the fact that the man was killed by police rather than passing away independently. The term "officer-involved shooting" serves as a strategic euphemism, avoiding directly implicating the officer as the shooter, instead suggesting that the officer was merely present and involved to some extent in the incident.

When exploring the anatomy of the phrase, it is clear that it is a noun phrase. Therefore, there is no verb, which means that there is no action and it is impossible to assign agency to a subject or an object. In this way, the readers do not know who is doing the shooting, because the noun phrase does not state which person is the subject (the perpetrator of a crime) and which person is the victim. To say that a man is 'involved' in some incident is to insinuate that while he was implicated in some way, he was not at the center of the action, and was not the primary actor in the event. When reports of death or disaster are written in the passive voice, they insinuate that the event was a result of some natural cause or inevitable chain of events.[36]

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[35] https://www.cjr.org/analysis/officer-involved-shooting.php

[36] https://www.dailydot.com/irl/police-killing-black-people-language/

7. MEDIA COVERAGE OF BLACK DEFENDANTS

Global Strategy Group(2021) in collaboration with EJI (The Equal Justice Initiative) published the report *Innocent until proven guilty? A look at media coverage of criminal defendants in the U.S.* [37]They used data from 10 criminal cases; 5 of black defendants, and 5 of white defendants, and compared how they were covered in media. They based their research on the imagery, language choices, framing of the accused, and the victim and reporter's background. Research conducted that media coverage in the US is racially biased and often aids the process of unjust outcomes in the criminal legal system. According to the report, white victims are 4 times more likely to have a photo with friends or family included in media coverage than black victims.[38] Adding a photograph humanizes the criminal and depicts him as a member of a family, a community, and a loved individual. When readers associate a man with a community of family and friends, the readers' empathy increases and it is easier to defend his crime. When the article does not include a photograph, the criminal defendant's identity is unknown, so he becomes dehumanized and he is merely a perpetrator of a crime; therefore, the empathy of the readers decreases and it is easier to judge the defendant. The research found that words frequently used to characterize white defendants are *father, son,* or *man*, while black defendants are often described as *arrested* or *accused.* For example, the name of a black defendant Howell Emanuel Donaldson was rarely present in media coverage, however, 57% of pre-trial coverage presented him as a *serial killer*. Quotes from family and friends regarding white defendants were nearly twice as likely to appear in articles than about Black defendants. Black defendants were often presented with quotes from judges or lawyers, which created a formal and less humanizing account of the defendants.[39]

[38,39] Global Strategy Group."Innocent Until Proven Guilty? A Look at Media Coverage of Criminal Defendants in the U.S.", 2021., Available at : https://globalstrategygroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/GSG_Report_Innocent_Until_Proven_Guilty.pdf

[39] Global Strategy Group."Innocent Until Proven Guilty? A Look at Media Coverage of Criminal Defendants in the U.S.", 2021., Available at : https://globalstrategygroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/GSG_Report_Innocent_Until_Proven_Guilty.pdf

According to Lawrence (2000), there is a possibility that societal problems exist less in reality than in perception. In addition, a societal problem will be understood as a problem only if it is intentionally highlighted in the news. If there is a negative pattern in the way that black individuals are represented in media, they are likely to become viewed as dangerous and threatening members of the community. On the other hand, if the media does not treat police brutality as an issue, people will not recognize the problem and will continue to put faith in the forces.[40]

When journalists cover a story of a black criminal defendant, they usually perform a strategy called *ethnic blame discourse* which is the belief that the detriment to society is due to the harmful activities of minorities. This tactic impacts the way journalists represent black youth, often leading audiences to believe black youth deserve the punishment they receive because their behavior needs to be regulated. Ethnic blame discourse is one of the tools that helps journalists frame the story. Media can change the narrative and represent a situation in a desired way. Robert Entman(1993) defines framing as the selection of " some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text." If a journalist is reporting on a robbery committed by a black man, they can choose to deemphasize certain characteristics and conversely emphasize another set of characteristics. For example, framing the man as poor, uneducated, dangerous, and aggressive represents him as a threat to society. Low education, unemployment, and past crimes are key factors that instill fear and bias into the minds of readers. [41]

According to the analysis of Smiley and Fakunle(2016), recent media coverage of the deaths of six unarmed Black males (Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Akai Gurley, Tamir Rice, Tony Robinson, and Freddie Gray) by law enforcement uncovered four major recurring themes: (1) fixation on victims' past and/or current behavior as criminal, (2) focus on victims' physical composition (large stature)and attire, (3) emphasis on the location where the victims were killed or lived as crime-ridden and impoverished, and (4) negative, stereotypical elements about the victims' lifestyles. [42]

40 Lawrence, Regina G., and Allissa V. Richardson, The Politics of Force: Media and the Construction of Police Brutality, Updated Edition (New York, 2022; online edn, Oxford Academic, 20 Oct. 2022), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197616543.001.0001,accessed 15 Aug. 2024.

41 Jackson, Chloe, "Framing Race: An Analysis of Media Coverage of the Racially Motivated Murders of Emmett Till and Trayvon Martin" (2021). Honors Theses. 783. https://aquila.usm.edu/honors_theses/783

42 Dukes, K.N. and Gaither, S.E. (2017), Black Racial Stereotypes and Victim Blaming: Implications for Media Coverage and Criminal Proceedings in Cases of Police Violence against Racial and Ethnic Minorities. Journal of Social Issues, 73: 789-807. https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12248

Pew Research Center(2023) published the survey which inquired black Americans if they ever see news that is racist or racially insensitive in some way. About four in ten (39%) said they see this kind of racially insensitive news extremely or fairly often, and an additional 41% say they sometimes see such news. Research also asked Americans if they could contribute a reason. About half (51%) say outlets pushing agendas is a major factor, and 45% say the same about journalists not being informed. Others suggest racist views among people at the news outlet (42%), the speed of the news cycle (37%), and a lack of black staff at the news outlet (36%) are major reasons for racist or racially insensitive coverage.[43]

In some highly publicized crimes—such as the 1989 alleged rape of a wealthy, young white woman in Central Park by a"*gang*" of Latino and black young men—young men of color appear particularly subjected to descriptions that associate them with extreme threat and dehumanizing traits. Journalists often used words such as *savage* and *wild* to describe the young men in the 1989 case[44]. Both *savage* and *wild* are words often used to describe untamed animals. If a person uses adjectives that are widely associated with animals in order to describe a human being, they are inevitably viewing the individual as harmful and dangerous to society. In addition, those labels reflect a historical period of colonial and white supremacist language that was created to differentiate between white people and people of color.[45] Using these terms not only reinforces the power imbalance between privileged and marginalized groups, it also instills fear of minority groups into readers' minds.

It is important to consider the aspect of negative pretrial publicity that is often subjected to people of colour. One study found that black and Latino defendants are twice as likely than white defendants to be subjected to negative pretrial publicity. Furthermore, defendants who victimized whites were more likely to have prejudicial information broadcast about them than defendants who victimized nonwhites.[46]

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[43] https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2023/09/26/black-americans-experiences-with-news/

[44] Delgado, Richard, and Jean Stefancic. "Critical Race Theory: An Introduction." *Law and Contemporary Problems*, vol. 51, no. 4, 1989, pp. 133-147. Duke Law Scholarship Repository, pg.100.https://scholarship.law.duke.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1495&context=lcp.
[45] https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/words-and-phrases-commonly-used-offensive-english-language-1.6252274

[46] Delgado, Richard, and Jean Stefancic. "Critical Race Theory: An Introduction." *Law and Contemporary Problems*, vol. 51, no. 4, 1989, pp. 133-147. Duke Law Scholarship Repository, https://scholarship.law.duke.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1495&context=lcp.

8. LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF EUPHEMISMS IN MEDIA

"Louisville mayor ends **police misconduct** probes tied to scathing DOJ report in wake of Breonna Taylor death"[47]

Using *misconduct* to describe a no-knock warrant followed by a shooting downplays and minimizes the severity of the situation and disregards police brutality as a societal issue. It is a vague term that can refer to a minor infraction or a serious code violation. *Misconduct* has euphemistic implications because the word is mostly associated with breaches of rules and policies. From a pragmatic standpoint, it is interpreted in terms of law, therefore, it does not invoke a lack of human decency, morality, and respect. In addition, the readers not involved in the police laws can simply assume that the use of excessive force by police officers is performed in the line of duty and in hopes of protecting the citizens from dangerous individuals.

Avoidance of Emmett Till's Lynching

Racially motivated murder is often framed in media by using an emphasis on a person's race and previous crime records. To change the narrative, journalists often shift focus from the police authorities to the victim. However, avoiding to accurately depict the murder can be even more harmful than emphasizing race in the story. In the case of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old black teenager murdered in 1955 by the police after whistling at a woman, mainstream media obscured and censored his lynching by stating that *the boy was found dead* or using the phrase *death following a confrontation.* In 1955, racial bias was even more prominent in everyday life, as well as in the media. The significance of Emmett Till's murder reached the audience only due to black press coverage of his lynching which catalyzed the civil rights movement in America.[48]

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[47] https://www.foxnews.com/us/louisville-mayor-ends-police-misconduct-probes-tied-scathing-doj-report-wake-breonna-taylor-death

[48] Oby, Michael Randolph, "Black Press Coverage of the Emmett Till Lynching as a Catalyst to the Civil Rights Movement." Thesis, Georgia State University, 2007.
doi: https://doi.org/10.57709/1061286

Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman

Referring to George Zimmerman as a *Neighborhood Watch Captain* in the context of Trayvon Martin's murder legitimizes Zimmerman's actions, obscures racial profiling, and normalizes vigilantism. Zimmerman is seen as a hero of the neighborhood and community protector, rather than the self-appointed vigilante who committed a racially motivated murder. [49]Media coverage of Trayvon Martin's murder incites fear of people of color in readers' minds and portrays Zimmerman as a man aware of what is happening and capable of fighting harmful citizens. If the media does not address that Zimmerman is a self-appointed watch captain, the public perceives him as an officer on duty fulfilling the task.

Tamir Rice – *big for his age*[50]

Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old boy was murdered by a racially motivated police officer who mistook Rice's toy gun for an actual weapon. Rice was described by the media, as many other black children and men, as surprisingly big sized for his age, which is an attempt to justify an officer's thought process in which he saw an armed, threatening black man and acted on his impulse. This case was interpreted as a tragical accident, which justified the officer's incapability of properly assessing the situation, rather than acting on impulsive thoughts. [5]Framing the case as a tragic incident depicts the issue as an individual one, rather than a common problem in the country. To gradually convey the problem of racism in the world to people, such cases should be presented not only as individual cases but also collectively compared and analyzed in the media.

[49] https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/2012/0324/Who-is-George-Zimmerman-and-why-did-he-shoot-Trayvon-Martin

[50] https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/12/28/why-prosecutors-keep-talking-about-tamir-rices-size-36-pants/

[5] https://edition.cnn.com/2020/12/29/us/tamir-rice-shooting-no-federal-charges/index.html

9. Conclusion

In conclusion, the use of euphemisms presents both advantages and disadvantages in shaping public discourse. On the one hand, euphemisms can soften harsh realities, on the other hand, they often obscure the truth and manipulate perceptions, leading to potentially dangerous misjudgments. In today's media landscape, euphemisms are frequently employed, particularly in discussions of war and global events, where the choice of language can frame entire narratives. The influence of such language is socially far-reaching, especially when wielded by high authorities or mass media. Findings demonstrated that Donald Trump's rhetoric during the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on public opinion and contributed to a rise in anti-Asian sentiment. In addition, linguistic choices displayed in the media regarding black victims of police brutality have a significant impact on public perceptions and juridical decisions. The power of language is especially impactful on those who lack access to higher education or motivation to critically engage with information. In an age of technological development where flashy headlines dominate, many are guilty of forming opinions based on superficial impressions rather than informed research. This blind acceptance is dangerous in a world where trust is often placed in political leaders and media without sufficient scrutiny. The limitations of research on racial discourse include a lack of empirical data that precisely quantifies the extent to which media portrayals of ethnic minorities influence public opinion. Future studies should prioritize exploring how unconscious perceptions are shaped, rather than merely focusing on numerical data. In today's world, with ongoing global conflicts, the media remains the primary source of information. However, the framing of events, such as wars, varies significantly depending on whether the narrative is presented by Israeli or Palestinian sources. It is imperative that individuals in influential positions, who have the potential to impact global events, educate themselves on these issues, think critically, and strive to transcend inherent biases.

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