
Dying and killing: euphemisms in current English

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Among friends, we avoid expressing unwelcome facts as an act of kindness. When our political and military leaders avoid expressing the harsh truth, their motives are usually different.

EUPHEMISMS have no doubt been used ever since the birth of languages, and surely constitute a linguistic universal. We are all aware of them and we all use them when it is desirable to avoid drawing attention to the less pleasant aspects of daily life such as the need to empty one's bladder or bowel. They are respectful in that they show concern for the feelings of our fellow human beings; the more delicate the social situation and the more unpleasant the subject matter we refer to, the more careful we must be in selecting a euphemism for the purpose. Perhaps the most painful fact to deal with socially is the death of someone known to the person we are addressing, and for this purpose the English language puts a copious word-board at our disposal. To list just a few of these euphemisms, people don't die, they pass away/on or perhaps go to meet their Maker; the dead are the deceased; they are not buried but laid to rest; and the grave is their last home or God's acre. We all use euphemisms of this kind and when using them we are fully aware that we are performing acts of social kindness, however small, so let us label this type as 'respectful'. In paying its respects to the fallen now being flown back to Britain from Iraq and Afghanistan, the BBC also deems it obligatory to report the praises heaped upon each returning warrior. Wars being particularly messy ways of going to one's death, it is not surprising that this patriotic sort of respectful euphemism is regularly used as the equivalent of a screen in a hospital ward, to hide the blood and pain and bodyparts from us; but Wilfred Owen had of course already warned us about 'The old lie: Dulce et decorum est/ Pro patria mori.'

The act of killing, too, has long had its share of euphemisms. In the gangster films of my youth a victim might be wasted, put away, snuffed out, bumped off, taken for a ride and so on; and Cold War prisoners could be silenced, sidelined or liquidated, for example. In more recent years, however, high-level coinages of military euphemisms have proliferated. Far from being 'respectful' in purpose, many are deliberate attempts to obfuscate military actions, to hide their mistakes and to excuse the perpetrators. During the Gulf War, on 2 February 1991, the *Daily Telegraph* said 'Whatever may have been its first casualty, the English language has been its second.' Among the euphemisms for killing that had already



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Some of these posts were undertaken on leave of absence from his lectureship in Manchester University, a post he held until 1992. He had published widely in the field of TESOL, but since then has concentrated on writing about Burma. His books include 'Back to Mandalay' (1990), 'Inroads into Burma' (1997), 'The Traveller's History of Burma' (1998) and (with Khin Thant Han) 'The Folk-tales of Burma: an introduction' (2000). Email: gwabbott@btinternet.com

been deployed were taken out, softened up and friendly fire, and in a fit of anger I had written a little poem called 'Casualty':

'He had been trained to take out other men.
We had made sure his weaponry was smart,
And softened up the enemy with carpet
Bombing. Sadly, he was taken out

By some friendly fire.'
Instead he could have taken out some girls,
The mirror having proved him smart enough;
And one, perhaps, happy to take him home,
Might have softened up on some dark carpet
By some friendly fire.

The difference between friendly fire and collateral damage seems to be that the latter refers to the accidental (ie, careless) killing of civilians rather than combatants.

The deliberate slaughter of civilians has spawned the appalling euphemism ethnic cleansing – appalling because the verb cleanse has such pleasant connotations of healing and hygiene. The phrase is defined in *The Oxford Dictionary of New Words* as 'The mass expulsion or extermination of a people from a minority ethnic or religious group within a certain area', and clearly Radovan Karadjic and Ratko Mladic were guilty of carrying out such a policy. Strangely, though, I have not yet seen the phrase applied to the systematic demolition of homes and the eviction or murder of their Palestinian occupants by Israeli forces. Having signed the UN Convention on Torture, the US had to find a euphemism for its treatment of Guantánamo Bay detainees and chose abuse; the UK has followed suit in the context of prisoners at Abu Ghraib. Furthermore, the finding of foreign territory on which to carry out such illegal practices as waterboarding has been labelled by these allies as extraordinary rendition, thus prevent-

ing me from using the phrase to describe a superb performance by a concert pianist.

Returning for a moment to everyday domestic contexts in which we use 'respectful' euphemisms, we dislike the idea of having our pets killed so we have them put down or (strangely enough) destroyed. I suppose we use this last euphemism because we associate destruction with inanimate things such as equipment or houses rather than living creatures, and I think it is for this same reason that today's fearfully powerful bombs and missiles are labelled weapons of mass destruction when they are really weapons of mass death. Indeed, one of the latest and nastiest of these weapons is the neutron bomb, which leaves buildings and other structures intact while killing all their living occupants. We have become too used to the initials WMD; we should insist on having the phrase uttered/printed in full, with the D standing for death.

Although I have concentrated on military contexts, the euphemism is of course thriving in other major spheres, for instance financial (creative accounting and massaging for falsifying) and meteorological (global warming for overheating and climate change for climate damage). This lack of truthfulness has become so pervasive that the phenomenon itself has spawned the new labels openness and transparency for honesty and spin for its opposite. In the Houses of Parliament, members are not permitted to accuse each other of lying. As long ago as 1986 one member claimed that he was being 'economical with the truth' and much later it was said that George Bush and Tony Blair had 'created a false impression' about Iraq's weapons of mass death. The fact that euphemism is so embedded in our political systems makes it all the more important that we should resist it. ■