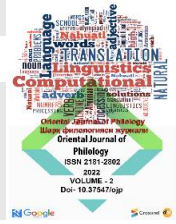




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THE ROLE OF EUPHEMISMS IN CONSTRUCTING POLITICAL REALITY IN MEDIA DISCOURSE

Zilola Boltayeva

Doctoral Student at Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages

E-mail: zilolaboltaeva0@gmail.com

Samarkand, Uzbekistan

ABOUT ARTICLE

Key words: euphemism, political discourse, media discourse, doublespeak, critical discourse analysis, framing, ideological manipulation, linguistic strategy, reality construction.

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Abstract: This article examines the role of euphemisms as strategic linguistic tools in the construction of political reality within media discourse. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Critical Discourse Analysis, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, and pragmatic linguistics, the study investigates how political euphemisms operate as mechanisms of truth evasion, reality manipulation, and ideological framing in English-language media texts. Four major categories of political euphemisms are identified and analysed: military euphemisms, economic euphemisms, politically correct euphemisms, and diplomatic euphemisms. The findings demonstrate that euphemistic language in media discourse is strategically motivated and serves to obscure uncomfortable realities, shift responsibility, and construct a politically favorable version of events for public consumption. The article concludes that a critical understanding of euphemistic strategies is essential for media literacy and the democratic accountability of political language.

MEDIADISKURSDA SIYOSIY VOQELIKNI YARATISHDA EVFEMIZMLARNING ROLI

Zilola Boltayeva

Samarqand davlat chet tillar instituti doktoranti

E-mail: zilolaboltaeva0@gmail.com

Samarqand, O'zbekiston

MAQOLA HAQIDA

Kalit so'zlar: evfemizm, siyosiy diskurs, media diskursi, aldamchi nutq (doublespeak), tanqidiy diskurs tahlili, freymlashtirish, mafkuraviy manipulyatsiya, til strategiyasi, voqelikni qurish.

Annotatsiya: Ushbu maqolada evfemizmlarning ommaviy axborot vositalarida siyosiy voqelikni qurishda muhim til strategiyasi sifatidagi o'rni tadqiq etiladi. Tanqidiy diskurs tahlili, konseptual metafora nazariyasi va pragmatik tilshunoslik nazariy asoslariga tayanib, tadqiqot siyosiy evfemizmlarning ingliz tilidagi media matnlarida haqiqatdan qochish, voqelikni manipulyatsiya qilish va mafkuraviy freymlashtirish mexanizmlari sifatida qanday ishlashini o'rganadi. Siyosiy evfemizmlarning to'rtta asosiy kategoriyasi aniqlangan va tahlil qilingan: harbiy evfemizmlar, iqtisodiy evfemizmlar, siyosiy jihatdan to'g'ri evfemizmlar va diplomatik evfemizmlar. Natijalar shuni ko'rsatadiki, ommaviy axborot vositalaridagi evfemistik til strategik jihatdan motivatsiyalangan bo'lib, noqulay haqiqatlarni yashirishga, mas'uliyatni siljitishga va siyosiy jihatdan qulay voqealar versiyasini ommaga taqdim etishga xizmat qiladi.

РОЛЬ ЭВФЕМИЗМОВ В КОНСТРУИРОВАНИИ ПОЛИТИЧЕСКОЙ РЕАЛЬНОСТИ В МЕДИЙНОМ ДИСКУРСЕ

Зилола Болтаева

Докторант

Самаркандского государственного института иностранных языков

Электронная почта: zilolaboltaeva0@gmail.com

Самарканд, Узбекистан

О СТАТЬЕ

Ключевые слова: эвфемизм, политический дискурс, медиадискурс, двоееречие (doublespeak), критический дискурс-анализ, фреймирование, идеологическая манипуляция, языковая стратегия, конструирование реальности.

Аннотация: В данной статье исследуется роль эвфемизмов как стратегических языковых инструментов в конструировании политической реальности в медиадискурсе. Опираясь на теоретические основы критического дискурс-анализа, теории концептуальной метафоры и прагматической лингвистики, исследование изучает, как политические эвфемизмы функционируют в качестве механизмов уклонения от истины, манипулирования реальностью и идеологического фреймирования в англоязычных медиатекстах. Выявлены и проанализированы четыре основные категории политических эвфемизмов: военные, экономические, политически корректные и дипломатические эвфемизмы. Полученные результаты

свидетельствуют о том, что эвфемистический язык в медиадискурсе носит стратегический характер и служит для сокрытия неудобных фактов, переложения ответственности и конструирования политически выгодной версии событий.

Introduction. Language has always been the primary instrument through which political actors construct, negotiate, and legitimize reality. In the contemporary media landscape, where information is produced and consumed at unprecedented speed and scale, the strategic use of language to shape public perception has become a defining feature of political communication. Among the various linguistic strategies employed in this process, euphemism occupies a particularly significant and frequently underestimated role.

A euphemism, in its most general sense, is the substitution of a mild, indirect, or vague expression for one that might be considered too harsh, direct, or unpleasant [1]. While euphemisms serve legitimate social functions — such as expressing sensitivity in discussions of death, illness, or personal loss — their deployment in political and media discourse frequently serves a markedly different purpose. As George Orwell observed as early as 1946, “political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness,” designed “to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind” [2]. Orwell’s insight remains as relevant today as it was in the mid-twentieth century, perhaps more so given the amplifying power of modern mass media.

The phenomenon of political euphemism has attracted significant scholarly attention within the fields of pragmatics, critical discourse analysis (CDA), and cognitive linguistics. William Lutz’s foundational work on doublespeak — language that “makes the bad seem good, the negative appear positive, the unpleasant appear attractive or at least tolerable” established the ethical and analytical framework within which political euphemism is now routinely studied [3]. Norman Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis has demonstrated that media texts are never linguistically neutral but are shaped by and in turn reproduce ideological structures of power [4]. More recently, George Lakoff’s work on cognitive framing has shown that the conceptual metaphors underlying political language exert a powerful influence on how citizens understand and evaluate political reality [5].

Despite this body of scholarship, relatively little attention has been paid to the systematic analysis of euphemistic strategies across different categories of political media discourse, particularly in relation to the specific mechanisms by which such language constructs rather than merely reports political reality. The present article addresses this gap by examining the structural,

semantic, and pragmatic features of political euphemisms in English-language media discourse, with particular focus on their role as instruments of reality construction and ideological framing.

Literature review. Euphemism: Definition and Function. The study of euphemism has a long history within linguistics and rhetoric. The term derives from the Greek euphemismos — meaning "to use words of good omen" — and traditionally denoted the substitution of favorable expressions for unfavorable ones in religious or social contexts. In modern linguistic scholarship, euphemism is understood as a pragmatic phenomenon governed by principles of politeness, face-saving, and social taboo avoidance [6].

Lutz offers a foundational distinction between two types of euphemistic use. The first, which he terms "genuine euphemism," involves the tactful avoidance of painful or offensive subjects out of sensitivity for the feelings of others — as when one says "passed away" rather than "died." The second, which he designates "doublespeak," involves the deliberate use of euphemistic language to mislead, deceive, or obscure inconvenient truths [3]. This distinction is of critical importance for the analysis of political media discourse, where the boundary between tactful indirection and deliberate obfuscation is frequently and strategically blurred.

Lutz identifies four principal types of doublespeak: euphemism proper, jargon, gobbledygook, and inflated language [3]. Of these, euphemism and inflated language are most frequently encountered in political media texts, as they allow political actors to reframe negative realities in positive terms while maintaining a veneer of factual accuracy. Examples such as "collateral damage" for civilian casualties, "enhanced interrogation" for torture, and "downsizing" for mass redundancies illustrate how this process operates in practice [7].

Critical Discourse Analysis and Political Language

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as developed by Fairclough, provides the most comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between language, power, and ideology in media discourse [4]. Fairclough's three-dimensional model — which analyses texts at the levels of description, interpretation, and explanation — enables the analyst to trace the connections between specific linguistic choices in media texts and the broader social and ideological structures that those choices reproduce or contest.

For Fairclough, the language of media discourse is never merely descriptive but is always simultaneously constitutive: it does not simply reflect a pre-existing political reality but actively constructs and naturalizes that reality through the systematic selection and combination of linguistic resources [4]. This insight is fundamental to the present study's approach to political euphemism: the use of euphemistic language in media texts is not simply a matter of word choice but a form of ideological practice that shapes the cognitive landscape within which citizens interpret political events.

Zhikhareva's work on manipulative strategies in political media discourse extends this framework by identifying the specific tactics through which media texts distort information, substitute concepts, and conceal inconvenient facts [8]. Euphemism is identified as one of the primary tactics in this manipulative repertoire — characterized by “variability and dynamism” in its adaptation to changing political circumstances.

Cognitive Framing and Conceptual Metaphor

Lakoff's theory of cognitive framing provides a complementary perspective on the mechanisms through which political euphemisms construct reality [5]. According to Lakoff, political language is structured by underlying conceptual frames — cognitive structures that determine how information is categorized and evaluated. When a politician or media outlet selects a particular euphemism, they are not merely choosing a polite synonym but activating a specific cognitive frame that shapes the listener's or reader's understanding of the event in question.

The euphemism “collateral damage,” for example, activates a frame associated with the inevitable and regrettable side effects of a carefully managed operation, rather than the killing of innocent civilians. “Undocumented migrants” activates a frame of bureaucratic irregularity rather than desperate human displacement [9]. In each case, the euphemism does not merely soften an unpleasant reality but reconstitutes it cognitively, making certain responses - sympathy, outrage, political action - less likely and others - acceptance, indifference, legitimation - more so.

This cognitive dimension of euphemistic language is particularly significant in the context of media discourse, where the repeated use of particular euphemisms across multiple outlets, over extended periods of time, can normalize entire ideological frameworks and render invisible the political choices they embody.

Research methodology. The present study employs a qualitative, text-analytical methodology combining Critical Discourse Analysis [4], [12], pragmatic analysis, and conceptual metaphor analysis. The primary corpus consists of 120 English-language media texts collected from major British and American news outlets - including The New York Times, The Guardian, BBC News, and CNN - published between 2015 and 2024. Texts were selected on the basis of their coverage of politically sensitive topics including armed conflict, immigration, economic policy, and diplomatic relations, as these domains have been identified in the scholarly literature as particularly rich sites of euphemistic language use [8].

The analytical procedure proceeds in three stages, following Fairclough's three-dimensional model [4]. In the first stage (description), individual euphemistic expressions are identified by contrasting the contextual meaning of a lexical item with its basic (dictionary) meaning — a principle borrowed from the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIPVU) [10] — and by checking candidate items against a specialised dictionary of euphemisms [7]. In the second stage

(interpretation), identified euphemisms are classified according to their structural type (lexical substitution, nominalization, passive construction, metaphorical extension) and their pragmatic function (truth evasion, reality softening, responsibility shifting, legitimation). In the third stage (explanation), the results are interpreted in relation to the ideological and political contexts from which they emerge.

The analysis is organized around four categories of political euphemism — military, economic, politically correct, and diplomatic — which have been identified as the principal domains of euphemistic practice in English-language political media discourse [8]. These categories are not mutually exclusive but represent analytically productive points of focus that together constitute a comprehensive account of euphemism's function in contemporary political media language.

Results and analysis. *Military Euphemisms.* Military euphemisms represent perhaps the most extensively documented category of political doublespeak in the scholarly literature. The strategic use of euphemistic language to describe the realities of armed conflict serves to minimize public resistance to military operations, obscure accountability for civilian casualties, and maintain the moral credibility of state violence.

The expression "collateral damage," widely used in media reporting of military operations from the Gulf War onward, is a paradigmatic example. The term displaces the direct description of civilian casualties — with all the moral weight and political consequences that such a description would carry — with a neutral bureaucratic phrase that frames the deaths of non-combatants as an unfortunate but technically inevitable by-product of a legitimate operational process. As Lutz observes, such euphemisms are “designed to alter our perception of reality” [3].

Similarly, “enhanced interrogation techniques” the phrase used by the U.S. government and widely reproduced in media discourse to describe practices condemned internationally as torture — illustrates the capacity of euphemism to effect a fundamental reconstitution of moral categories. By substituting “enhanced” (positive connotation: improvement, upgrade) for “torture” (unambiguous moral condemnation), and “techniques” (neutral, professional register) for “abuse” or “cruelty,” this construction renders morally and legally unacceptable conduct representable within the framework of legitimate professional practice [7].

Other prominent military euphemisms identified in the corpus include: “surgical strike” for bombing raids (activating a medical frame of precision and therapeutic purpose); “neutralize” for kill; “friendly fire” for the killing of one's own soldiers; “pacification” for the military suppression of civilian populations; and “boots on the ground” for the deployment of combat troops. In each case, the euphemistic expression systematically eliminates the human cost and moral significance of the action it describes.

Economic Euphemisms. Economic euphemisms operate in the domain of financial and labour policy, where they serve to render the negative social consequences of economic decisions — unemployment, poverty, inequality — as necessary, rational, and ultimately beneficial outcomes of impersonal market processes.

“Downsizing,” “rightsizing,” and “workforce restructuring” are among the most widely encountered economic euphemisms in the corpus. All three expressions substitute positive or neutral frames (optimization, adjustment, structural improvement) for the direct description of mass job losses and their human consequences. The nominalization characteristic of these expressions — transforming the active process of “dismissing workers” into the abstract noun “restructuring” — simultaneously removes human agency (and thus accountability) from the description of what is in fact a deliberate corporate or governmental decision [4]. A parallel case at the level of state policy is “fiscal consolidation,” used for cuts in public spending: the expression frames austerity as a technical act of putting accounts in order, while its social consequences remain outside the description.

Politically Correct Euphemisms. Politically correct euphemisms originate in the legitimate aim of avoiding offensive or stigmatising labels for social groups: “visually impaired” for blind, “senior citizens” for old people, “economically disadvantaged” for poor, “people with disabilities” for the disabled. In such cases the substitution serves the protective, face-saving function that Lutz associates with genuine euphemism [3], [6]. In political media discourse, however, the same mechanism may acquire a second function. An expression such as “economically disadvantaged” describes poverty as a static attribute of a group rather than as the outcome of specific policies, and thereby removes the question of responsibility from the description [4]. It is in this category that the boundary between social sensitivity and strategic vagueness is most difficult to draw, a point taken up in the Discussion below.

Diplomatic Euphemisms. Diplomatic euphemisms constitute a category characterized by the use of vague, indirect, or formally neutral language to describe international relations and foreign policy actions in ways that avoid explicit acknowledgment of conflict, coercion, or illegality.

“Constructive engagement” for political or economic relations with authoritarian regimes; “targeted measures” for sanctions; “facilitating a political transition” for supporting regime change; “concerns were expressed” for formal diplomatic protest — these expressions illustrate the systematic preference for abstraction and formality in the linguistic representation of international political action. Media reproduction of diplomatic euphemisms serves to normalize the gap between stated and actual intentions in international politics, rendering the exercise of power invisible through the substitution of procedural for substantive description.

The phrase “bringing democracy” or “democracy promotion” widely used in media coverage of military interventions is a particularly significant example. By framing military action in terms of a universally valued political good, this euphemism simultaneously legitimizes the use of force and deflects attention from the geopolitical interests that motivate it [9]. The cognitive frame of democracy as a gift to be delivered rather than a political condition to be achieved through indigenous political processes naturalizes interventionist foreign policy and places it beyond the reach of critical scrutiny.

Discussion. The analysis presented above confirms and extends the existing scholarly consensus regarding the strategic role of euphemism in political media discourse. Across all four categories examined, the consistent pattern is one of linguistic substitution that serves to minimize negative evaluation, suppress moral accountability, and normalize ideological positions that would be more difficult to sustain if expressed in direct language.

The findings support Fairclough’s central claim that media language is constitutive rather than merely reflective of political reality [4]. The systematic use of euphemistic language in media texts does not simply describe a pre-existing political world but actively constructs that world in ways that favor the interests of powerful political actors. By repeatedly and consistently using terms such as “collateral damage,” “enhanced interrogation,” or “fiscal consolidation,” media discourse naturalizes the ideological frameworks within which these terms are embedded, making them appear as neutral descriptions rather than strategic political choices.

The cognitive framing dimension of euphemistic language, as analysed through Lakoff’s framework [5], is particularly significant in this respect. The mental models activated by political euphemisms do not merely soften unpleasant realities but reconstitute them cognitively in ways that shape subsequent reasoning and evaluation. This finding has important implications for media literacy: understanding political euphemism requires not merely the ability to identify indirect or vague language but the capacity to analyse the cognitive frames such language activates and the ideological work those frames perform.

The distinction between legitimate euphemism and doublespeak, as proposed by Lutz [3], remains analytically useful but requires qualification in the context of media discourse. The corpus data suggests that the boundary between genuine sensitivity and deliberate manipulation is frequently blurred, and that many instances of apparent political correctness in media language serve the double function of expressing social values while simultaneously obscuring political realities. A critical approach to political media language must therefore be attentive not only to the intentions of individual speakers but to the systemic patterns of linguistic choice that characterize media discourse as a whole.

Furthermore, the findings of the present study point to the importance of diachronic analysis in the study of political euphemism. The repeated use of euphemistic expressions across media outlets over time does not merely reflect a pre-existing ideological consensus but actively produces one — normalizing particular ways of seeing political events and rendering alternative framings progressively more difficult to articulate and sustain. This productive, reality-constituting dimension of political media language deserves greater attention in future research.

The cross-categorical analysis undertaken in the present study also reveals an important structural feature of political euphemism that has received insufficient attention in the existing literature: the tendency of euphemistic expressions to combine and reinforce one another within single media texts, creating layered discursive frameworks in which multiple dimensions of political reality are simultaneously obscured. A news report that describes a military operation using “surgical strikes” (military euphemism), justifies it in terms of “democracy promotion” (diplomatic euphemism), and frames its economic costs as “investment in stability” (economic euphemism) constructs a comprehensive ideological narrative that is substantially more resistant to critical scrutiny than any single euphemistic expression would be in isolation [11].

Conclusion. This article has examined the role of euphemisms in constructing political reality in English-language media discourse. Through the analysis of four major categories of political euphemism — military, economic, politically correct, and diplomatic — the study has demonstrated that euphemistic language in media texts functions not merely as a polite alternative to direct speech but as a powerful mechanism of reality construction, ideological framing, and political manipulation.

The principal findings of the study may be summarized as follows. First, political euphemisms are strategically motivated linguistic choices that serve to suppress moral accountability, minimize negative evaluation, and normalize ideologically contested political positions. Second, the cognitive frames activated by political euphemisms exert a demonstrable influence on how citizens understand and evaluate political events, making the analysis of euphemistic language an essential component of media literacy. Third, the distinction between legitimate and manipulative euphemism cannot be determined by formal linguistic analysis alone but requires attention to context, intention, and the systematic patterns of linguistic choice that characterize media discourse as a form of ideological practice.

The findings of this study carry several practical implications. For media consumers, they underscore the importance of critical reading practices that attend to the ideological work performed by apparently neutral or technical language. For educators, they suggest the value of incorporating the analysis of political euphemism into curricula for media literacy, critical thinking, and language education. For policymakers and civil society organizations, they point to

the need for sustained critical attention to the language of public communication as a condition of democratic accountability.

As Orwell recognized, the corruption of public language is ultimately the corruption of public thought and, through thought, of democratic politics itself [2]. The present study contributes to the ongoing effort to understand and document this process, with the aim of equipping citizens with the analytical tools necessary to see through the euphemistic constructions of political reality that pervade contemporary media discourse.

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