

A linguistic picture of the world through modern English ecoeuphemisms

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Языковая картина мира, отражённая в современных английских экоэвфемизмах

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Abstract: *the article explores a group of English euphemisms used in online media to downplay the seriousness of the current environmental situation in the world.*

Аннотация: *в статье анализируется группа английских эвфемизмов, использующихся в сетевых СМИ при освещении экологической проблематики.*

Keywords: *euphemisms, environmental problems, online media, semantic generalisation.*

Ключевые слова: *эвфемизмы, экологические проблемы, сетевые СМИ, семантическая генерализация.*

The outstanding modern linguist David Crystal defines a euphemism as a ‘vague or indirect expression in place of one that is unpleasant or offensive’ [1]. Other authors will use the word ‘innocuous’ for the definition of a euphemism [2], [3], [5]. Yet, a careful analysis of linguistic data shows that euphemisms may not be as innocuous as they seem – in particular, when they are used for the coverage of environmental issues in online media.

The data presented and discussed in the article were obtained from a number of Internet sources including online news services (the BBC, Bloomberg News, Courthouse News Service etc.), blogs (Power Line, Simply Shrug, Alcoa etc.) and online newspapers (The Guardian, The Times, The New York Times, The Telegraph etc.). The first stage of research required analysing articles / reports / blog entries posted on the stated web-platforms and dealing with environmental issues from the point of view of recurrent ecoeuphemisms employed by the authors. It resulted in compiling a list of lexical items commonly used in online media to cloak the true meaning of certain environmental concepts. The number of the euphemisms totalled 18 items: *biosolids, bycatch, challenge, decline, dramatic change in smth, emissions, exposure, extirpation, harvest, incidental take, overburden, ozone nonattainment area, particulates, produced water, reclaimed water, research whaling, routine exceedances, to take.*

Let us now consider what brought these ecoeuphemisms to life – in other words, let us investigate what aspects of global environmental concerns these lexical items are supposed to obscure.

The noun *biosolids* denotes ‘solid organic matter recovered from a sewage treatment process and used especially as fertilizer’ [4]. What remains hidden from the recipient is the fact that in modern agricultural practice it actually means ‘human excrement’. Understandably, the use of the ecoeuphemism saves the agricultural industry from financial disaster – who would be eager to buy vegetables knowing that they were fertilised in such a peculiar way? Linguistically, euphemisation in this case is effected through semantic generalisation – both the solid and biological (organic) nature of the forementioned substance admit of no doubt, yet, it is exactly the lack of specification that misleads the recipient.

Those who are unconcerned about the vegetables they eat might well be worried about the water they drink if they know that the ecoeuphemism *reclaimed water* means ‘former wastewater (sewage) that is treated to remove solids and impurities, and used in sustainable landscaping irrigation, to recharge groundwater aquifers, to meet commercial and industrial water needs, and for drinking’. The ecoeuphemism, therefore, obfuscates the problem of water treatment and its further usage. The omission of the specifying element ‘sewage’ (as in ‘reclaimed sewage water’) leads to a convenient semantic generalisation which provides the basis for euphemising the lexical item in question.

The morphemic composition of the noun *bycatch* suggests a positive idea of (unplanned) surplus / addition, whereas the true meaning of the lexical item is ‘the portion of a commercial fishing catch that consists of marine animals caught unintentionally’ [4]. The taboo topic concealed by the euphemism is the high percentage of fish and marine animals ending up being thrown away (dead or maimed).

Closely related to ‘bycatch’ are the ecoeuphemisms *incidental take* and *to take*. Used euphemistically, the verb ‘to take’ came to mean ‘to kill’ (Cf: *Each spring turkey season, about 80,000 Kentucky turkey hunters take 25,000 or more birds* [6]). The converted noun ‘take’ in ‘incidental take’ preserves the transformed meaning, so the whole euphemism actually means ‘incidental killing (of an animal)’. The adjective ‘incidental’ is supposed to cushion the blow after the recipient figures out the meaning of ‘take’. After all, incidental killing is pardonable

unlike killing ‘proper’. ‘Bycatch’, ‘incidental take’ and ‘to take’ also result from the euphemising process of semantic generalisation.

The next three ecoeuphemisms display features of meiosis or understatement.

Thus, the primary meaning of the noun *challenge* is ‘a difficult task or problem; something that is hard to do’ [4]. Used in the context of the environmental narrative, its semantics equals that of ‘danger / threat’.

The noun *decline* is another example of meiosis turning a lexical item into a euphemism. The direct meaning of ‘decline’ is ‘the process of becoming worse in condition or quality; a change to a lower number or amount’ [4]. Yet, when it is employed to describe an environmental difficulty, ‘decline’ actually means ‘dying out’ / ‘being on the verge of extinction’. Using ‘decline’ instead of, say, ‘extinction’, certainly makes the raised problem look less critical.

The same type of euphemisation (meiosis) is observed in the ecoeuphemism *a dramatic change in (sth)*, whose direct meaning does not in any way suggest ‘a steep reduction in the number of species disrupting a food chain’ – yet another taboo environmental issue.

The noun *emissions* is not directly associated with harmful substances like exhaust fumes or greenhouse gases sent into the air by countless cars and factories exactly due to its euphemisation. Used without the (pertinent) epithet ‘harmful’ / ‘hazardous’, the noun ‘emissions’ is perceived in its general sense – ‘something sent out or given off’ [4].

The noun *exposure* joined the group of ecoeuphemisms through understatement. A primary meaning of the lexical item is ‘the fact or condition of being affected by something or experiencing something’ [4]. In environmental contexts ‘exposure’ actually means ‘the fact of dying as a result of being exposed to smth’.

The ecoeuphemism *extirpation* is an interesting case of euphemisation illustrating the famous Chinese chaos stratagem ‘Disturb the water and catch a fish’: the term ‘extirpation’ means ‘destroying or removing something completely’ [4]. Dictionaries mark both the noun and the verb ‘to extirpate’, from which it was derived, as ‘very formal’, which means that they are not very familiar to the general public. As a result, the meaning is obfuscated not by any semantic manipulations bringing about euphemisation, but exactly by the stylistic layer to which ‘extirpation’ refers – the formal style. Thus, the recipient might interpret the meaning of extirpation as ‘decline’ or ‘disturbance’ instead of ‘extermination’, or ignore it altogether. The mechanism of this way of euphemisation is the same as in using terminology or borrowings in order to hide the true meaning, so we can call it ‘quasi-borrowing’ (especially considering the Latin etymology of the word under analysis).

The noun *harvest* normally means ‘the amount of crops that are gathered’ [4]. Gradually, it also came to denote ‘the amount of a natural product gathered in a single season’ [4], eliminating the semantic component of ‘domestication / farming’ from the concept. This semantic shift hides the fact of man’s selfishly consumerist attitude to nature.

The direct meaning of *overburden* is ‘material overlying a deposit of useful geological materials or bedrock’ [4]. For the mining industry, though, it includes soils, grasses, shrubs, trees and anything that is in the way of the valuable deposits below. Thus, the meiotic euphemism conceals the fact of soil erosion and removing trees and plants from an area of land.

Ozone nonattainment area is a fancy way of denoting a locality where air pollution levels persistently exceed National Ambient Air Quality Standards. “Where would you rather live – in a polluted area or an in ozone nonattainment area?” is a rhetorical question. Besides its quasi-scientific sound, the expression appeals to the recipient with the misleading implication that ozone is the only natural resource that the area is sorely lacking in. Euphemisation in this case is effected through meiosis and word choice in stylistic terms thanks to which the ecoeuphemism under analysis sounds like a terminological unit.

The ecoeuphemism *particulates* casts the same spell on the recipient due to its scientific matter-of-factness precluding any panicking over dust, soot and other minute particles that clog people’s lungs and cause respiratory diseases (which is exactly what the word means – ‘of or relating to minute particles’ [4]).

The term *produced water* is used in the oil industry to describe water that is produced as a byproduct along with the oil and gas. In fact, it is waste water, and the euphemism covers up for the unsustainability of the mining process. Euphemisation is once again achieved thanks to semantic generalisation, as is the case with *routine exceedances*.

The ecoeuphemism *routine exceedances*, meaning an industrial plant’s regularly violating clean air or water standards, easily turns violation into exceedance, reassuringly labelling it as ‘routine’, i.e. ‘usual’, ‘common’, ‘widespread’, ‘nothing worry about’.

Research whaling is a cynical way of explaining / justifying commercial whaling practices. The attributive noun ‘research’ distracts the recipient’s attention from the core noun ‘whaling’ and simultaneously misleads them by suggesting the idea of a noble scientific cause. The signified is therefore concealed by means of semantic substitution.

Thus, the most common way of producing ecoeuphemisms is semantic generalisation. By pushing the limits of word semantics, the sender significantly complicates the process of decoding the message by the recipient as in this case the gap between the signifier and the signified becomes enormous.

Summing up the results of the undertaken analysis concerning the taboo aspects of global environmental problems allows recreating a distorted picture of the world that the discussed ecoeuphemisms form in the recipient's mind: we live in a world where people get their drinking water from crystal clear streams and rivers; where the agricultural industry uses appropriate fertilisers; where plants and factories barely pollute the environment, and what they put into the air is almost harmless; where they catch only the kinds of fish intended for harvesting; where the mining industry doesn't destroy habitats or cause soil erosion; where whales are studied by scientists instead of being killed by whaling fleets.

The list of ecoeuphemisms cited in the paper is by no means complete. In general, euphemisms refer to a very dynamic layer of the lexicon due to the ever-changing nature of reality and the accelerated pace of modern life. Yet, the provided analysis clearly demonstrates that euphemisms are not always as innocuous as they are sometimes presented, and that the ability to decode them is a useful skill in the face of information overload, aggressive information warfare, marketing techniques and media manipulation.

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