

## SPECIFICITY OF USING EUPHEMISMS IN ENGLISH

*The article under consideration reveals the specificity of using euphemisms in English. The primary means of political correctness is euphemism. This linguistic phenomenon reflects the country's culture, traditions, and mentality. A euphemism is a trope that consists of an indirect, covert, polite, softening designation of any object or phenomenon. Using euphemisms, unpleasant words are replaced with more pleasant or neutral associations. The abstractness of meaning creates in the listener (reader) the most indefinite or, according to at least, an unbiased impression of the denotation. Analysis of micro texts in terms of the use of politically correct vocabulary in magazines and newspapers "The Economist", "The Gazette", "The Dallas Morning News", "The New York Times", "Newsweek", "The Washington Post" and others showed that there is still a strong tendency to use politically incorrect terms to denote racial and ethnic accessories. However, there is a tendency to use politically correct vocabulary in the topics "female/male gender", age, and towards people with physical disabilities.*

**Keywords:** linguistics, euphemism, language style, social taboo, political correctness.

**Хайруліна Н. Ф., Борзова О. Д. Специфіка вживання евфемізмів в англійській мові.** Статтю присвячено специфіці використання евфемізмів в англійській мові як одного із засобів політичної коректності. Це мовне явище відображає культуру, традиції та менталітет країни. Абстрактність значення створює у слухача (читача) максимально невизначене або принаймні неупереджене враження від денотата. Висвітлено різні підходи до аналізу політичної коректності, що трактується як особлива ідеологічна реальія, мовний рух, культурно-поведінкова та мовна тенденція, мовна толерантність тощо. Актуалізовано критичну думку щодо самої дефініції терміна "політична коректність" (головним чином, через перший компонент у цьому словосполученні). Зазначено, що такі зміни в мовомисленні активізуються в складні перехідні історичні періоди, коли відбувається переоцінка традиційної системи цінностей, коли зазнають трансформацій певні соціокультурні норми. Наголошено, що поява політкоректності тісно пов'язана з виникненням ідеї культурного плюралізму. Особливу роль відведено мовному та культурно-поведінковому чиннику. Аналіз мікротекстів в аспекті використання політкоректної лексики в журналах і газетах, зокрема «The Economist», «The Gazette», «The Dallas Morning News», «The New York Times», «Newsweek», «The Washington Post», показав, що все ще існує тенденція використовувати політично некоректні терміни для позначення расової та етнічної приналежності. Детально розглянуто найбільш поширені види дискримінації, зокрема

статеву, расову, за фізичними вадами і за належністю до сексуальних меншин. Автори запропонованої розвідки здійснили спробу виокремити та описати стилістичну категорію “політична коректність”, а також класифікувати й охарактеризувати політично коректні евфемізми.

**Ключові слова:** лінгвістика, евфемізм, мовний стиль, соціальне табу, політична коректність.

## Introduction

In every language, there are words from which one instinctively or deliberately refrains from using. Certain cultural norms require a person to find or create new words and expressions in the language, which, under certain conditions, “replace such designations that seem undesirable to the speaker, not quite polite, or too harsh” (Halaichuk, 2013: 231). In linguistics, such words and expressions are called euphemisms, the basis of which is the desire not to offend or hurt a person's feelings.

Today, there are quite a large number of definitions of euphemism. One of the most common states that “euphemisms” (Greek “euphernismos” from “eu” – good and “pherni” – I say) are usually understood as “emotionally neutral words or expressions used instead of synonymous words or expressions that seem indecent to the speaker, rude or tactless” (Hryhorash, 2013: 328).

Next, we will consider other definitions of euphemisms in foreign and domestic linguistic literature. Let us start with the purposes of euphemisms presented in English dictionaries. It should be noted that the study of euphemisms is given special attention by American and English scientists, which is associated with the needs of applied linguistics, which is the preparation of dictionaries of euphemisms and the tradition of their inclusion in explanatory dictionaries. The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English defines euphemism as “a mild or vague expression by which a thought is expressed that is too strong or direct” (Hryhorash, 2013: 331).

The Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines a euphemism as “a word or phrase used to avoid saying an unpleasant or offensive word.”

Today, the phenomena of political correctness are studied not only in the linguistic aspect but also in the social and cultural aspects. The study of domestic and foreign scientists O. Bondarenko, M. Palazhchenko, U. Eko, L. Ionina, E. Pokholkova and others is devoted to these questions. In recent decades, the problem of political correctness and its main aspects have been widely presented in the works of linguists, political scientists, philosophers,

sociologists, psychologists, and cultural scientists. In particular, political correctness became the subject of research by foreign scientists D. Adler, D. D'Souza, D. Ravich, and others. It is the variable approach to the study of the phenomenon of political correctness that allows the authors to consider it as a stylistic category in the proposed investigation.

Thus, the article aims to highlight and describe political correctness as a stylistic category. Achieving the set goal involves solving the following tasks: consider the content, functioning, and language means the statement of political correctness as a particular stylistic category; identify the causes and main stages of development of the concept of “political correctness”; describe the changes that have taken place in the modern English language under the influence of political correctness.

### **Research Methods**

The article uses the following research methods:

- a descriptive method that allows to study and systematize the literature on the issues under consideration;
- method of distributional analysis, used to identify the main thematic groups of politically correct vocabulary;
- a method of text analysis used to study the category of political correctness at the text level;
- a quantitative analysis method that allows us to identify the quantitative ratio of politically correct/incorrect vocabulary in the texts under consideration.

### **The Main Material**

The concept of “political correctness” has evolved over time, and its development can be understood through various stages. It's important to note that people's perspectives on political correctness vary, and the term can have positive or negative connotations depending on one's viewpoint. Political correctness emerged in response to social and political changes. It was influenced by the civil rights movement in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s, as well as the feminist and environmental movements in subsequent decades. The goal was to promote inclusivity, equality, and sensitivity to marginalized groups.

The term “political correctness” became widely debated in the 1990s, with some media outlets and conservative figures using it pejoratively to criticize what they saw as excessive language policing. This period marked

a significant shift in the perception of political correctness, as it increasingly became associated with overzealous or irrational restrictions on speech. In the 21st century, debates about political correctness persist. These discussions revolve around cancel culture, microaggressions, safe spaces, and freedom of speech. Public figures, institutions, and universities continue to grapple with how to navigate these issues. The concept of political correctness remains a complex and contentious topic, with differing views on its necessity and impact. It continues to be a dynamic and evolving concept, reflecting the changing cultural and political landscape.

Many domestic and foreign researchers studied the phenomenon of Euphemia: A. Katsev, G. Paul, J. Hughes, J. Vandries. The most famous dictionaries where the reflected systematization of English euphemisms are: "A Dictionary of Euphemism" by R. Holder, "A Dictionary of Euphemisms and Other Doubletalk" by H. Rawson, "The Wordsworth Book of Euphemisms" by J. Neaman, C. Silver (Holder, 2022: 70).

According to J. Lawrence: "Euphemism is the form of words that (from different to that reasons) expresses the idea in a softened, veiled or more respectful way form" (Lawrence, 1976: 56).

The most appropriate definition of "euphemism" for the authors of this article is given by K. BurrIDGE: "Verbal taboos, even those imposed by purely social conventions, serve direct human interests by avoiding the things that threaten to cause distress and offense. These include reference to body parts, bodily functions, sex, madness, disease, death, and the supernatural – and since the 1990s, the problem of how to talk to and about others, particularly others perceived to be disadvantaged or oppressed. Euphemism is avoidance language. It provides the verbal escape hatch for speakers confronting the problem of how to talk about things they would rather not talk about. Dysphemism is the counterpart of euphemism. It involves the verbal resources for being offensive, abusive, or just plain letting off steam. Like euphemism, it is motivated by fear and distaste, but also by hatred and contempt" (BurrIDGE, 2006: 455).

The main goal of the euphemization process is to avoid communication conflicts. In addition, euphemisms in various spheres of human life and society pursue different objectives. In particular, euphemisms in the political sphere are subordinated to the goal of veiling or deliberately distorting information about actual events or facts "to deceive public opinion and express something unpleasant more delicately" (Hryhorash, 2013: 331)

For example, words such as “pre-emptive” (priority) instead of “aggressive” (aggressive), “involvement” (involvement) instead of “invasion” (invasion), “conflict” (conflict) instead of “war” (war) are tightly included into the English vocabulary as euphemisms to cover up the true nature of military intervention in the affairs of other states. In context, many words and expressions acquire euphemistic “ennobling properties.”

The process of euphemization is closely intertwined with the process of nomination – one of the three fundamental processes that shape human speech activity (the other two are predication and evaluation). Objects that, for ethical, cultural, psychological, or any other reasons, are not named or are challenging to call need euphemistic designation; the renewal of nominations is dictated by the need repeatedly to veil or soften the essence of what is considered inconvenient or indecent in a cultural society.

Euphemism has its specificity. It manifests itself both in the linguistic essence of euphemism and in topics that are most often subject to euphemism, areas of use of euphemisms, the types of linguistic methods and means by which they are created, and the difference in social assessments of euphemistic ways of expression.

The following points are essential for the euphemization process:

1) the speaker’s assessment of the subject of speech as one whose direct designation can be qualified (in a given social environment or by a specific addressee) as rudeness, harshness, indecency, etc.;

2) the speaker’s selection of such designations not only softens the method of expression but also masks and veils the essence of the phenomenon; this is especially clearly seen in the example of semantically vague euphemisms such as fat (fat) is replaced by big-boned, differently sized, instead of bald (bald) the euphemism hair-disadvantaged is used;

3) the dependence of the use of euphemism on the context and the conditions of speech: the stricter the social control of the speech situation and the speaker’s self-control of his speech, the more likely the appearance of euphemisms, and, on the contrary, in poorly controlled speech situations and with high automaticity of speech (communication in the family, with friends, etc.) “direct,” non-euphemistic means of designation may be preferred to euphemisms.

In the political sphere, public opinion is skillfully manipulated with the help of euphemisms, in which the media plays a prominent role. Modern media have recently been characterized by increased use of rude and vulgar words and expressions (Burridge, 2006: 400).

A large group of euphemisms was created on the principle of politeness. As a rule, this group includes words and expressions that mitigate various types of discrimination.

1. Euphemisms that mitigate age discrimination. Even ageism arose – the oppression of people of a certain age. In order not to offend, for example, people of advanced age, the word *middlescence* (by analogy with adolescence) appeared in the language of recent decades – the period of life from 40 to 65 years. The period of life from 65 years onwards began to be called the third age. The euphemism *senior citizen* is widely used on official signs in transport, advertisements, museums, and public places. The use of the word *old* is avoided; instead, euphemisms such as *senior*, *mature*, and *seasoned* are common.

From a pragmatic point of view, the reaction of older people to these euphemisms deserves attention. Thus, one of the magazines published a satirical response from an older man addressed to media workers:

*“Call me Gramps, call me an old fogey-call me anything except a senior citizen”.*

The euphemism *geezer* caused a similar adverse reaction among older people. In the last century, this dialect form from *guiser* (one dressed in the guise of a mummer) meant older adult, particularly a woman; over the years, the word acquired connotations of eccentricity (which were later partially lost), and it, having changed its pragmatics in terms of gender, began to be used about men. This unit is often used in the phrase *geezer power*, by analogy with *gray power* (the ability of older people to assert their rights), which in turn appeared in the 70s modeled on black management (control of the black people) (Postman, 2000: 132).

2. Euphemisms that mitigate property discrimination. The reason for creating such euphemisms is often the desire of officials of various ranks to smooth out the problems of people's property inequality. The word *the poor* in print was replaced by *the needy*, *the ill-provided*, *the deprived*, *the socially deprived*, *the underprivileged*, and later *the disadvantaged* who find themselves in less favorable circumstances, and finally, *low-income people*” (Postman, 2000: 140).

3. Euphemisms that exclude discrimination against people with physical and mental disabilities. Almost every disadvantage is smoothed over by certain euphemisms: the word *cripple* is replaced by the euphemisms *differently abled*, *physically different*, or *handicapable*; *fat* & *thick* is replaced

by *big-boned*, differently sized; instead of *bald*, the euphemism *hair-disadvantaged* is used; instead of *deaf* – *aurally inconvenienced*, instead of *blind-unseeing*. Mentally disabled people are called *learning disabled*, special, mentally challenged people, and lagging students are called *underachievers*.

4. Euphemisms that mitigate racial and ethnic discrimination. Such words are names of various racial and national groups, emphasizing their identity and equal status. The word *black* is replaced by the euphemism member of the African diaspora, representative of the African diaspora, Indian – by the indigenous person resident.

The second layer of euphemistic vocabulary includes the phenomena of death and superstitious fear of any phenomena. The main pragmatic principle operating in this group can be defined as the principle of taboo.

For example, *moonchild*, a person born under the constellation Cancer, replaced the word *cancer*, which evokes associations with disease; hospice, originally meaning a shelter or hotel, now implies a hospital for incurable patients. *Insane asylum* has been replaced by the word *mental hospital*; the euphemisms *terminal episode*, *therapeutic misadventure*, or *negative patient care* outcome convey the death of a patient in a hospital.

To reduce the fear of death, the Catholic Church replaced the phrase *extreme unction*, which implies being in extremis *on the verge of death*, with the term anointing of the sick; the word *penance*, *fear of retaliation*, is replaced by the *rite of reconciliation*, *confessional* – by *room of reconciliation*. However, this group of euphemisms is rare in modern English.

There has been a noticeable increase in the tendency to form new euphemisms that raise the prestige of individual professions. Therefore, *the hairdresser* began to be called a *hairstylist* or *beautician*. Sometimes, the word *hairologist* refers to people in this profession. However, this euphemism is pragmatically marked according to the territorial parameter and is used only in the American version. *Flight attendants* and *stewards on airlines* (stewards, flight attendants, hostesses) began to be called *flight attendants*. *Cemetery employees* were traditionally known as *undertakers* but have become *morticians* and *funeral directors* in recent years. A *sanitation engineer* replaces the word *garbage collector*, and the euphemism *environmental hygienist* is nothing more than the name of a *janitor*.

Another group of euphemistic vocabulary is euphemisms that distract attention from the negative phenomena of reality. It seems appropriate to divide this group into several subgroups:



1. Euphemisms that serve as a cover for aggressive military actions. Many such words entered the language in the 60s of the twentieth century during the Vietnam War. The words involvement and conflict replaced aggression and war; the *suppression/destruction of armed resistance* began to be called *pacification*. Instead of the word *bomb*, the word *device* was used, and instead of *bombing*, *bombing* – limited *air strike* or *air support*. The euphemism *strategic hamlet* replaced *concentration camp*. Finally, the *dead* began to be called *body count* or *inoperative combat personnel*.

2. Euphemisms associated with negative consequences in the socio-economic sphere. During the twentieth century, *the economic crisis* was supplanted by the *slump*. The *slump* was replaced by *depression*, which gave rise to a new euphemism: *recession*. More modern terms meaning financial crisis include a period of economic adjustment, negative economic growth, and meaningful downturn. The euphemisms of *downsizing*, *rightsizing*, and *redundancy elimination* arose to soften the negative effect of the words *firing* *laying off*.

3. Euphemisms related to crime. The euphemism of correctional facilities replaced the word prison. *Correctional officers* or *custodial officers* returned *the former expression* *prison guards*. *The prisoners* are now called *clients of the penitentiary system*, *guests*, or *people temporarily enjoying hospitality from the state*.

To avoid anthropocentrism concerning the living world and to emphasize our biologically equal coexistence on the same planet with representatives of this world, the phrase “*animal companions*” is replaced, implying a person as *a master* or *owner*. *Domestic plants* return *houseplants*, *botanical companions*, and *plant companions*.

It is politically incorrect to prefer the *beautiful* and *pleasant* to the *ugly* and *unpleasant*. This politically incorrect *behavior* is called *lookism* (from look ‘to look, check’) – favoring the attractive over the less attractive, preferring the more appealing to the less beautiful.

## Conclusions

Globalization has become the basis for changes in communication norms in the modern world. Therefore, the concept of “political correctness” is gradually gaining international status. Since the primary means of expressing political correctness are euphemistic units, the classification by spheres of social life and groups was analyzed euphemisms in politically correct vocabulary.



The possibility determines the practical significance of the research use of its results and collected language material in learning English in lecture courses and practical classes with stylistics, lexicology, theory, and translation practice. Data and the research results can also be applied in professional activities of compilers of political texts, writing courses and diploma theses, and compiling reference materials.

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