# DOWNTONERS IN JOURNALISTIC ARTICLES

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## ABSTRACT

*The paper discusses the exploitation of euphemistic expressions in printed media to soften words or phrases considered to be vulgar or profane or negative. Several texts from The Jakarta Post were taken as the data source and all expressions in such texts downtoning the other negative ones were taken as the data for the analysis. The results show that the softening expressions in the forms of euphemistic expressions are created through two types of process, namely semantic shift and metaphorical transfer. Meanwhile, the motive behind the usage of the expressions is only one, i.e. because of the fear of causing psychic pain to the other participant(s). Having seen the types of and the motive behind of the euphemistic expressions exploited in journalistic articles, the writer as well as the readers of such texts can expectedly understand the message accommodated by the texts easily.*

***Keywords:*** *downtoner, euphemism, expressions, journalism, texts.*

## ABSTRAK

*Artikel ini membahas ungkapan-uangkapan ufemisme pada media cetak dalam bentuk memperpendek kata atau prase menjadi yang lebih fulgar atau negatif. Beberapa teks yang menjadi data dalam penelitian ini diambil dari surat kabar The Jakarta Post sebagai sumber data. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ungkapan-ungkapan yang diperpendek dalam bentuk uangkapan ufemisme dibuat melalui dua proses, yaitu proses pergeseran semantik dan proses transfer metaporik. Sementara itu, motif dibalik penggunaan ungkapan-ungkapan yang dipakai hanya satu, misalnya karena ketakutan terhadap luka fisik pada patrisipan yang lain. Dengan memahami bentuk dan motif dibalik ungkapan ufemisme yang digunakan dalam artikel-artikel jurnalistik tersebut, peneliti dan pembaca diharapkan dapat memahami pesan yang diberikan oleh teks dengan mudah.*

**Kata Kunci:** *ungkapan, eufemisme, jurnalisme, teks.*

## 1. Introduction

Texts have the quality of readability. Related to language, the readability of such texts actually can be related to the way the writers select the words and construct the grammatical arrangement. In short, the lexicogrammar quality of a text influences its readability. Furthermore, difficulties in understanding texts,

either written or spoken, sometimes derive from the limited understanding of the aspects of cultural knowledge backgrounding such texts, as every text is nutshelled by the context of situation and the context of culture where it is going on. One of the cultural aspects that can increase readers' ability in getting through a text is their understanding of euphemisms as the downtoning devices in such a text.

Journalistic texts are of several kinds. One daily newspaper may have more than ten types of different texts in one edition such as news report, editorial, feature, letter to editor, opinion, consultation, lifestyle, and so on. These texts have their own linguistic features—one of which is the use of downtoning expressions or commonly named as euphemistic expressions, which often influence the readability of the texts. The euphemistic expressions in the paper were taken from several articles in The Jakarta Post to show the types of softening expressions and also to see what kind of motive backgrounding the selection.

Euphemism is defined as a 'softener' for a taboo or an unpleasant word or expression, which is used when people want to find a polite or less direct way of talking about difficult or embarrassing topics. It is universal in which every ethnic with its language has its own forms of euphemism. Even, it is also stated that different periods in the same culture might have different forms of such expressions. The earliest forms of euphemism in any culture were believed to be religious. Gods in such a time were treated with respect amounting to terror. On that account, priests skilled with negotiation with supernatural became the mediator between people and gods. In their practices they were often prohibited to utter their real names of the power. As a consequence the priests then created indirect forms of reference to calm the spirit.

There are four categories for the semantic process formating euphemistic expressions. The first one is loan words from other lan-

guages. If a speaker feels inconvenient in using certain words in his/her own language as such words are considered to be vulgar or to be negative, borrowing words from other languages can be carried out. For example, the speakers of bahasa Indonesia tend to take English words to replace certain expressions in the language—sexual terms dominate this case such as adopting the word *petting* for the original word *mencumbu* or *bercumbu*. Meanwhile, Hughes (1988) suggested that in general the euphemistic expressions of this kind in English are taken from Latin as the words from this language are considered to be more positive than the original English ones.

The second category shows semantics shift. This process of formation suggests to use more general concept to substitute the more specific or more detail one. For example, the expression of *to have a bed with someone* has more general and indeed has softer meaning than *to have sexual intercourse with someone* as the latter has more specific concept so that it sounds more vulgar.

Metaphorical transfer is a process in which a speaker or a writer compares an entity with another. The comparison then softens the original expression which is considered to have negative meaning. In sexual domain, the expression *to wax the dolphin* metaphorically transfer the shape of penis which is like a dolphin and the action of waxing to replace the word of *to masturbate*. The former then sounds softer than the latter.

The last category accommodate the expressions which experience the process of being abbreviated for the initial characters only. Put in other words, this process suggests that the abbreviation in fact sounds more positive than the long form. For example, English people tend to say *ML* for *making love*, *mens* for *menstruation*, *Mr. P* for *penis*, and *Ms. V* for *vagina*.

Whatever cultural and historical aspects backgrounding the formation of particular eu-

phemisms are, the psychological and linguistic patterns underlying their formation are similar. Psychologically, meaning can be defined as the sum of our responses to a word or an object. After a word has been associated for a long period time with unpleasant elements, a substitute of another word free of these negative elements must be created.

Even though there are diverse motives generating the formation of euphemisms, in general the motives can be classified into two, namely fear and a desire to address the mysterious forces that rule the universe and the strong desire to avoid offending others. The former might best be exemplified by the fact when people are afraid to flout social and moral conventions, they refer to their lovers as companions; their fear of specific diseases has led them to create euphemistic expression substituting insanity and retardation, cancer, and so on.

The second motive is because of the fear of causing psychic pain so that people select kind words to be used to the others. In trying to make the other participant feel in a better 'position' or in trying not to offend him–hence a better social and interpersonal relationship between a speaker and such a participant is getting better—one often adopts a kind euphemistic expression forwarded to the other speaker, for example he prefers to say *discontinue* rather than *to fire an employee*. Within this category are euphemisms created by public relation officers and politicians in handling their jobs. For example, in English *disinformation* has replaced *lying* in political contexts, where it has recently been joined by *being economical with the truth*.

Euphemisms for profane words or expression are created because of the first motive. These expressions are generally taken from three areas: religion, excretion and sex. Profanities themselves are dependent on who use the words in social interactions and in what kind of situation. Some expressions are classified as 'normal' words because they are exploited in a conversation by adult speakers. However, when they are used by the same speakers in a public conversation or in a situation where children are present, they then become profane words so that euphemisms are needed to change their position. For example, the word 'shit' and 'piss' are words that are acceptable in adult conversation, but need to be changed by euphemistic expressions in a public conversation where children surround. This case also happens to any profane words for sex.

## 2. Research Method

Six articles in The Jakarta Post were taken as the source of data. Of these texts, twelve euphemistic expressions were taken as the data. They were then analyzed to see the way they are processed as well as to see the motives behind the exploitation of the expressions.

## 3. Result and Discussion

In journalism, euphemisms are exploited in any articles, e.g. news stories, Sunday articles, opinion column, and so on. Especially for the news articles, the headlines for the stories provide readers with enormous number of euphemistic expressions. The reason behind the exploitation of such expressions might come from the strategy of the news reporters to catch the eyes of the readers for reading such texts. Several words or phrases below are formed to replace for their 'vulgar' peers such as *Megawati **gives** SBY inauguration **a miss,** U.S. planes continue **air strikes** against targets in Falluja*, *Andrian **under custody** after eluding police,* and *Marquez has **the last laugh** on Columbian book pirates*.

Four headlines above were taken from The Jakarta Post in news articles. The formation of expressions number 1 to number 3 tends to be through a semantic shift. Such euphemistic expressions are formed to substitute the

whole for the specific part the reporters do not choose to talk. The phrase *gives a miss* semantically replace for the word *to be absent*; the expression of *air strike* substitute for the word *bombing;* and the word *under custody* is formatted for the word *to be arrested.* Different from the three expressions, *the last laugh* is formatted through the process of a metaphorical transfer. This word is used to compare the activity of laughing to the meaning of winning something.

Except for eye-catching the readers, these expressions are all formatted for the headlines with the motive of avoiding psychic pain or avoiding offend someone. It seems that if the first three euphemisms are replaced by their 'vulgar' expressions, the meaning of the headlines will be ruder or sometime become more 'cruel' for certain persons, especially those who are reported in the articles.

The exploitation of euphemistic expressions is also performed by writers for the content of the news articles. Three expressions below were taken from the texts in the same daily showing how the writer should select certain words or phrases to replace normal expressions because of certain motives. They are: *my **go between** looked for the **clients***, and *I just accompany him at a café. If a deal is on struck, then we **go to a hotel***.

Data 5 and 6 showing three euphemistic expressions above were taken from an article on teenage prostitute in Jakarta in The Jakarta Post Sunday edition. Each of the expressions replaces for certain normal word such as *go-between* for *broker*, *client* for *customer*, and *to go to a hotel* for *to have a sexual intercourse* (at a hotel). All the three euphemisms are formatted through a semantic shift meaning that the expressions are formed to substitute the whole for the specific part the writer does not choose to talk. As they are created through the same process, the three expressions are also created for the same motive —

that is avoiding a psychic pain for the participant interviewed and being reported in the article. Psychologically speaking, all the three euphemistic expressions are softer than their 'normal' counterparts.

The other six expressions demonstrate two types of process of formation—semantic shift and metaphorical transfer. The former is taken by the writers of the articles by selecting expressions with general meaning to soften the negative ones. With these wider words the vulgar meaning possessed by the original expressions is reduced. The following examples demonstrate the case.

The expression in the sentence of *Susno is expected to arrive* is selected to replace *is commanded*. The writer might do this strategy because he/she considered that for a high police authority like Susno the expression of *is commanded* sounds inappropriate—it is a little bit vulgar and impolite for him to be commanded. The same case happens for *during a questioning session*. This expression might be chosen for the same article to replace *during the interrogation*. The action of interrogating is usually carried out for criminals such as thief or robber. On that account, to have this expression for Susno is considered too negative, even though the procedure and what happens in the process are the same.

From a different article, police authorities are also reported for related case to Susno. The choice of *suspicious behavior* for *crimes* and *wrongdoing* for *corrupting* is believed to do because of the same reason to the two expressions above. The writer think that for the participants these expressions are appropriate as they are softer than the words representing the real action—*crimes* and *corrupting*. Meanwhile, the sentence *I think such a conclusion is illogical* was stated by National Police spokesman Sr.Comr. Zulkarnaen toward the statement of the International Crisis Group. The word illogical in such a sentence

was selected to replace the word wrong. This selection might happen as the spokesman would like to hedge the information he was sending. Saying that someone is *wrong* is too offensive or too vulgar, so replacing the word *wrong* with *illogical* sounds more polite and softer.

Five examples above show similar process of formation. They are created through semantic shift. Other expressions which are considered being able to accommodate the message intended by the writer are selected by shifting the meaning from specific to general one. For example wrongdoing can be carried out by corrupting, stealing, bribing, and so on. Therefore stating that a police authority did wrongdoing is considered more polite for him rather than saying that he corrupted. It happens for the other expressions for the same process.

The expression of *paves the way for terrorists* is believed to be softer rather than the word *to encourage*. The writer compares pavement as a media to accommodate the movement of some vehicles. Using this expression is considered to be softer rather than the word to encourage such *encourages the way for terrorists*. On that account, different from the other expressions, this softener is created through metaphorical transfer. Even though, a difference of formation process is demonstrated by this expression, all show similar motives. They are all exploited to avoid causing psychic pain for other participants.

## 4. Conclusion

The understanding of euphemistic words or phrases or expressions is a need to comprehend texts better. Even, in certain context, the failure in obtaining the meaning of such expressions leads to the failure of catching the content of the texts. The creation of the euphemisms is undoubtedly culturally bound. Each culture has its own forms of euphemisms different from those created in other cultures. Moreover, the creation of such expressions is also temporally bound; expressions that are 'normal' in certain time might be euphemistic in the next time. Therefore, reporters should realize and consider this phenomenon in doing their job, especially in expressing the idea they are reporting. Meanwhile, the readers of the texts should also consider the phenomenon to help the process of decoding the message in the texts.

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