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## **On Extralinguistic Motivation in Semantic Change: Euphemisation of Taboo Areas**

### **Abstract**

This article is meant to be a contribution to the study of the multifaceted nature of taboo and euphemism that represent those linguistic mechanisms that are created by the working of both overt and covert social and psychological factors. And so, the process of sense derogation goes hand in hand with euphemisation, the process of using a new word to refer to an item or concept that for various reasons language users hesitate to talk about straightforwardly. Once a euphemism is accepted, the original term that has been subject to replacement tends to become even less acceptable, undergoing the process of accelerated pejoration. Above the individual level, the use of a particular lexical item may be interdicted by the rules imposed by a given society or a certain sphere within a given society. The mechanisms of taboo and euphemism affect lexical items relatable to various levels of the Great Chain of Being, starting with the supra-human layer where there is the sphere of gods that has been universally subject to taboo, but also animal world where hunting taboos must ultimately be treated as a verbal tactic to obscure the hunter's intentions; the usage rules are motivated by the fear that the hunted animals may understand the hunters' speech and intentions.

**Keywords:** taboo, area of taboo, euphemism, pejoration, psychological causes, political correctness

Various analyses of historical meaning change point to the fact that – from the point of view of the advances of cognitive linguistics – one has grounds to claim that many such semantic developments are extralinguistically motivated, and they are generated by language-external mechanisms of human cognition grounded in human experience. Radden and Panther (2004: 31) argue that a fully-fledged theory that may aspire to bring to light the complete spectrum of causes must include a number of language independent factors, amongst others, cultural, social, psychological and anthropological motivations and conditionings. Here, we would like to concentrate on selected aspects of taboo and

euphemism, and – in particular – an attempt shall be made to encircle the main areas of euphemisation that may be distinguished.

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Obviously, one of the objective difficulties that we face in any discussion of taboo and euphemism is that the criteria for what is pleasant, moral, acceptable and proper have varied in different periods of the history of mankind, geographical location, as well as socio-cultural characteristics of a given nation. On the whole, the phenomenon of taboo works in various experiential areas, and the result is the rise of figurative substitution of tabooed lexical items, known as euphemism, which works as a linguistic veil on anything that is considered either unpleasant, immoral, unacceptable, improper and unwelcome. By nature, euphemisms are most frequently used to avoid those words and expressions that are directly under taboo, but also – not infrequently – they are employed to avoid a wide range of connotations that are negative in some way. In particular, it is fairly evident that many politicians and military men are well-known for notoriously employing euphemisms in order to glamorise their views and actions or to veil the true nature of their outlooks and deeds. And so, for example, such abstract nouns as *liberation* or *pacification* have come to be resorted to in order to refer to very much down-to-earth acts of killing of people, and *ethnic cleansing* has become a somewhat clinical euphemism to express the sense ‘killing or expelling unwanted ethnic groups’. In the battlefield area one of the most recent innovations is the expression *surgical operation* that has become a recent medicine-based passkey to encapsulate the idea of a well-organised military action carried out to eliminate either enemy leaders or/and vital elements of an enemy’s critical infrastructure.

More generally, in various cultures of the world the use of certain lexical items is believed to invite sinister, threatening or outright evil consequences, such as to expel demons, alienate the gods or activate meteorological calamities of different sorts and varying gravity. Such words that denote things/objects/phenomena that are feared or felt offensive or/and unacceptable are frequently replaced by some kind of figurative equivalents, that is descriptive, round-sounding terms that in some way render the word innocuous. A Zulu wife, for example, is not allowed to mention the name of her father-in-law or the names of his brothers (see: Anderson 1974: 179–180). In turn, the inhabitants of the Shetland Islands have developed – as richly documented by Jakobsen (1897) – extensive secondary vocabulary to name all parts of their fishing boats, species of fish and types of whether, that is, those aspects of their insular life they are so much dependent on.

One may formulate the rule that says that if at some point of its history a word is struck by a taboo ban, it must be at some later stage replaced by a harmless and smooth-sounding alternative that has come to be known as the *noa* term which is a Polynesian word for the word *that replaces a taboo word*, generally out of fear that the use of the original name may summon an object or action that is neither expected nor welcome. Language users resort to a number of mechanisms, among others they make use of lexical replacement, slight sense modification and radical sense transfer, in order to come to terms with the limits of social tolerance and/or peer acceptability, especially when they speak about what is either unmentionable or requires special verbal attention and care. It seems that the most important requirement that the euphemistic term has to meet is that it does not share the negative connotations of the dysphemistic term.

Both taboo and euphemism have far-reaching linguistic consequences on the processes of semantic change, and they oftentimes induce some form of lexical change. On the one hand, the most frequent result is that a pre-existing word starts to be used in a novel sense. For example, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century *tart* –

though present in the bakery sense since the Late Old English period – started to be used as a euphemism for *bitch* or *prostitute* (see: Kleparski 1986, 1990). In other cases, such as, for example, the case of the word *gosh*, the result of tabooisation is the rise of an entirely new lexical item that enters the vocabulary of a given language. For instance, in American English the lexical items *donkey* and *rooster* have replaced the nouns *ass* and *cock* respectively because of their homonymy with the latter pair that is under strong taboo. Obviously, lexical replacement is not necessarily limited to tabooed lexical items.

Taboo and euphemism seem to represent those linguistic mechanisms, that are influenced, or – to put it more adequately – created by the working of both overt and covert social and psychological factors, for example in the process of sense derogation, as pointed out by, for example, Denning *et al.* (2007: 149) the process of sense derogation often goes hand in hand with euphemisation, the process of using a new word to refer to an item or concept that language users hesitate to talk about straightforwardly. Once a euphemism is accepted, the original term or terms that have been subject to replacement tend to become even less acceptable, undergoing the process of accelerated pejoration. On the whole, euphemism is a pervasive phenomenon so deeply woven into virtually every known culture, that one has grounds to claim that every human has been, as Williams (1975: 198) puts it, [...] *preprogrammed to find ways to talk around tabooed subjects*. Above the individual level, not infrequently the use of a particular lexical item may be interdicted by the rules imposed by a given society or a certain sphere within a given society, a particular class of people or a particular professional group. Thus, for example, the word *cripple* is in present-day English virtually taboo as a noun, being replaced by *handicapped person* or *disabled person*, and – moreover – some language users advocate the need for replacing the last two formations with such inventions as *person with disability*, *handicapable* or *differently abled*.

### On Gods, Popes and Devils: Religious Taboo

What has come to be known as the Great Chain of Being is a hierarchical structure of all matter and life that begins with God and descends through angels, humans, animals down to minerals. The mechanisms of taboo and euphemism affect many items relatable to various levels of the Great Chain of Being, starting with the supra-human layer where there is the sphere of gods that has been universally subject to taboo. When we delve into the beginnings of human civilization we see that Bonfante (1939) regards the traditional manner of using the names of Ancient Greek gods accompanied by numerous epithets as a clear indication of religious taboo. The author maintains that the epithets of praise were meant to either hide and/or belittle the fact of pronouncing the particular name of god. This hypothesis gains more ground when we consider the fact that Judeo-Christian religiousness forbids believers to pronounce the name of god in vain. Note that, for example, the name of the Jewish god Yahweh is considered so sacred that it cannot be read out, and hence it is replaced with other synonymous lexical items.

As to Christianity, religious taboo has been frequently operative, and it has also been a powerful driving force behind the operation of various semantic alterations. For example, within Christian doctrine the observance of the Third Commandment that requires that *thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain*, as well as many other religious precepts, has resulted in the semantic expansion of a number of originally neutral lexical items, in which the element of the supernatural may become salient besides the previously central element of <POWER> and <AUTHORITY>, as evident in the history of *lord/ (our)*

*lord*. Due to the obvious reference to a person being in authority the meaning of the noun *lord* expanded to accommodate the supernatural sense when Christianity became established on the British Isles.

To remain on the religious path, English Puritans exerted much influence on the English language, as borne out by, for example, the semantic history of the English nouns *god* and *lord*. Like many other words and expressions located in the religious sphere, the two nouns were unquestionably subject to taboo rules, and – to a considerable degree – their status has remained unaltered until today. In order to avoid using the two nouns directly, not only substitution, but also the tool of formal modification, were often resorted to, and this was done by altering one or several elements in the tabooed lexical items. Hence, there are many modifications of the name *God*, such as, for example, *gad*, *gog*, *gom*, *gosse*, *gough*, *golly*, as well as a number of modifications of the name *lord*, such as, for example, *lam*, *lawks*, *losh*. Interestingly enough, in all English oaths involving the word *goodness* the noun is a substitute of *god*, for example in such collocations as *for goodness sake*, *goodness gracious* and *I hope to goodness*.

Very revealing material to illustrate the case further may be drawn from the time of the Protestant Revolution, in which the printing press was first put to use by Luther's disciples so that various terms expressing some form of religious authority became contested with varying degree of spite and hostility. As the result of the activity of the schismatics a good number of trivialising, critical or outright hostile terms relating to the Catholic church, Catholic doctrine and the Pope were coined in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century. Among others, this body of words includes the following lexical items:

*Papist* 'an adherent of the Pope, especially an advocate of papal supremacy',

*Popish* (hostile use) 'of or pertaining to popery, papistical',

*Popery* (a hostile term) 'the doctrines, practices and ceremonial associated with the pope as head of the Roman Catholic Church',

*Papistical/Papistical* (usually hostile or opprobrious term) 'of, pertaining to, or of the nature of a papist or papists',

*Papish* (a hostile epithet) 'papistical, popish',

*Papism* 'the papal system; popery, Roman Catholicism',

*Popestant* (a nonce word) 'papist as opposed to *protestant*',

*Popeling* 'an adherent, follower, or minister of the Pope'.<sup>1</sup>

One could generalize and say that the Puritans succeeded in censoring the use of the name of God through legislation, and – as one of its consequences – at a later period there was great production and high currency of the so-called apostrophised forms that made their first appearance in English at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> and at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The historically evidenced body of such innovations includes the following formations:

'*zounds* euphemistic abbreviation of *by God's wounds* (used in oaths and asseverations),

'*slid* euphemistic abbreviation of *God's lid* (*eyelid*) (a form of oath common in the 17<sup>th</sup> century),

'*slight* abbreviation of *God's light* (used as a petty oath or exclamation),

'*snails* an abbreviation of *God's nails* (used as a petty oath or exclamation),

'*foot* a shortened form of *God's foot* (used as an exclamation).

1 When we consult the historical evidence given in the *OED* we notice that the subsequent religious rapprochement has silenced the majority of derivatives itemised above with the exception of *papism*, *popery* and *papist*, which are occasionally used in present-day English.

Although this claim may sound somewhat far-fetched and may require large-scale comparative studies to be verified, it seems that religious taboo is particularly frequent in Romance languages, such as Italian and Spanish. Chamizo-Dominguez and Sánchez Benedito (2005) provide parallel examples from Spanish where a number of fossilised linguistic items of religious taboo can be traced, especially in exclamations, such as the Spanish *Pardiez* “Goodness me!”, *Rediez* “Gee!/Gosh!” or *Diantres* “Dash it!”. Note that although the Biblical prohibition of pronouncing the name of God in vain continues to be binding today, it seems that currently emphasis tends to be placed on the <IN VAIN> element rather than on the element <PRONOUNCING THE NAME OF GOD>. Hence, such Spanish words as *Dios* “God” and *demonio* “devil, demon” can be uttered these days without the speaker being the object of religious or social opprobrium.

### The Privates and Their Physiology

Another sphere that is strongly affected by the mechanism of taboo and euphemism is the area of body parts and, in particular, privy parts, both male, and – even more so – female (see: Kowalczyk 2015). As shown by, among others, recent studies by Kowalczyk (2015, 2019) and Kowalczyk and Kleparski (2015) in the history of English there has been a particularly copious growth of the body of synonyms used with reference to female breasts and vagina, many of which are attributable to the working of euphemisation processes through the process of foodsemy.<sup>2</sup> Sagarin (1962: 125) argued that the abundance of euphemistic coinages to name female breasts, such as *tits*, *dugs*, *jugs*, etc., may be treated as an index of *the need for masculine identification with peer groups who display toward the breast the ambivalence of shame and want, fear and desire, guilt and lust*. Notice, however, that many of the historical coinages targeted at female private body parts are hardly ambivalent, especially those that in some way identify women by means of reference to a specific element of their anatomy, and are obviously dysphemistic rather than euphemistic, for example, *piece of ass*, *meatgrinder*, *pisspallet*, *tail*, *chamberpot* and *corn-hole*.

Abstracting from the female of the species, human privy parts are related to two major spheres of taboo and euphemism, namely excretion and having sex. Among others, the tabooisation pressure on the former has led to the rise of innumerable euphemisms for *toilet*, and the concept of having sex has resulted in the formation of innumerable synonyms of such sex-related words as *copulate* and *whore* in many languages of the world. As to the concept of having sex, the example that is frequently quoted in the literature of the subject is the example of French *putain* ‘whore’, the meaning of which may be defined as ‘prostitute who works on the street or in a brothel’, the lexical item that is used in French both as a noun, *putain buissonnière* ‘shrub/bush whore’, and as an adjective, *femme publique et putain* ‘public and whorish woman’. In spite of the fact that the noun *putain* is considered nowadays an offensive word, it was introduced first as a euphemism not only in French, but also in other Romance languages, such as

2 The blend *foodsemy* employed here has been coined by the author of this paper almost 2 decades ago on the basis of the by now well-evidenced and much studied form of metaphoric semantic change known as *zoosemy* (animal metaphor), which almost universally entails the rise of evaluatively loaded senses of words related to the macrocategory HUMAN BEING.

Spanish *puta*, Portuguese *puta* and Italian *puttana*, and its roots go back to Vulgar Latin neutral *\*putto/putta* ‘boy/girl’.<sup>3</sup>

Let us continue on the theme of sexual life, and narrow our attention to one of its possible manifestations encapsulated in the semantics of the noun/adjective *gay*. The very act of sexual intercourse is expressed in English by a variety of lexical items, such as, for example, *copulate*, *shag*, *sleep with* and many, many others. Starting with the Latinate verb *copulate*, the verb originally meant ‘join together’, and it originated as a euphemism for sexual activity introduced into English to avoid the use of older English words in this sphere that had – with time – become unbearably crude. However, with the passage of time, the verb *copulate* has become so heavily charged with taboo overtones that – as pointed out by McColl Millar (2015: 34) no self-respecting girl would normally confide to her friends the nature of her relation with her partner by saying *I’m copulating with Greg*, but rather she would resort to such circumlocutions as saying *I’m sleeping with Greg*, *I’m seeing Greg* or *I’m going out with Greg*, and yet it is rather unlikely that her friends would ever assume that the girl and Greg were enjoying regular chess sessions over the weekends.

When we consider homosexuality and the history of the English adjective/noun *gay*, we see that although today it is politically correct to approve of homosexuality as another equally justifiable form of sexual behaviour, on a par with heterosexuality, when we consider the history of the adjective *homosexual* we come to the conclusion that the term has become largely ostracized, because of the pejorative downfall it has undergone. Thus, the term *homosexual* having moved to the peripheral regions of the field, another lexical item had to fill the gap in the centre of the field in question, and the lexical item *gay* with the same intended meaning became the acceptable term of reference. In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the word *gay* in its everyday usage was still applied in the historically primary 14<sup>th</sup> century sense ‘cheerful, sportive, merry’, although there was a pattern of a manifest downgrading nosedive of its sense, probably due to the presence of such conceptual elements as <LACK OF DISCRETION> and <LACK OF RESPONSIBILITY>, becoming more and more salient elements of the sense of the word, as in “addicted to social pleasures and dissipations; of loose or immoral life”, especially in the compound *gay dog* used in such senses as “a man given to revelling or self-indulgence” current from the early 17<sup>th</sup> to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, and in the American English 19<sup>th</sup>-century slang sense “impertinent, too free in conduct, over-familiar”, but also in a female-specific sense, “leading an immoral life, living by prostitution” in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Finally, as shown by the *OED*, by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century there appeared a radical change of meaning shown by the rise of the pejorative sense “homosexual person”, which – in turn – has recently become officially anointed by the power of political correctness as the term used with reference to a homosexual person that belongs to the <STANDARD> layer of the vocabulary.

Let us now move to the restroom zone of relieving oneself. The semantic history of *toilet* discussed in Traugott and Dasher (2002: 58–59) illustrates both the working of taboo and euphemism, and the sense evolution of the historically primary 16<sup>th</sup> century sense “cloth for wrapping clothes” that was with time extended to cover various other activities associated with such sense elements as <GROOMING> and <DRESSING>. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century there developed the sense “a cloth cover for a dressing table”, “the articles used in dressing, and the process of dressing”, and later “the articles for washing oneself”. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the word came to denote a dressing room, and in American English the sense became narrower, that is, “a dressing room with washing facilities, hence lavatory”. At a certain point of time the noun *toilet*

3 It may be added at this point that the masculine *putto* (mainly used in plural, *putti*) is a technical term used in art studies, which means “a figure of an infant boy especially in European art of the Renaissance”.

became associated – via the working of the mechanism of euphemism – with the utensil for disposing of bodily excretions, and the enclosed space where the fixture is located. As pointed out by Algeo (2010: 215), at one point in the history of English *toilet* came to be used as a euphemism for *privy* – which was itself a euphemism with a literal sense “private place” borrowed at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century from O.F. *privé, privee* ‘latrine’ literally meaning ‘private place’. In turn, Traugott and Dasher (2002: 58–59) argue, with time the noun *toilet*, due to the working of taboo, started to be replaced by other formations, such as *restroom, ladies room, bathroom, cloakroom gents, convenience, closet, powder room, little boys’/girls’ room* and others.

### Disease and Death Taboo

The sphere of disease, in particular serious health disorders, may in some way be treated as hell’s kitchen leading to death that terminates it all. That is how it is perceived by many of those whose health and daily existence is seriously endangered by either some looming or imagined threat of illness and suffering. Yet, names in the sphere of ill health and death may be very misleading. In the Newspeak of George Orwell’s 1984, there are numerous formations such as, for example, *joycamp* meaning “forced-labour camp” and *Ministry of Love* used to convey the sense “prison where dissenters are tortured” which – in spite of the pleasant and very promising names – stand for institutions that have nothing to do either with joy or love, but rather may be considered as the foyer not only to mental and corporal suffering and oppression but also to death. The mechanism of euphemistic name swapping is frequently resorted to in the medical sphere where the illnesses of mind and body are subject to the mechanism of euphemisation, the aim of which is simple to define. Here the obvious objective is to prettify, or at least to downplay the threat of serious diseases and the inevitability of death. Beyond doubt, this type of motivation is ultimately rooted in human fear and superstition of suffering and death. Note that in English any serious health problem may nowadays be referred to as a *condition* and so, for example, we speak of *liver condition, heart condition* or *lung condition*. Given this, the noun *condition*, until recently functioning solely as an entirely unmarked word, with time developed a negatively charged elements <BAD>, <DANGEROUS> in its semantic structure.

In this context, yet shifting our attention from the field of medicine to the language of the military, one may point to a parallel change that has affected the use of the English noun *situation*, which was originally in no way negatively charged, much like the nouns *condition* and *institution* used in their non-medical senses.<sup>4</sup> The once innocent noun *situation* has in recent times – through the mechanism of intensification of meaning – acquired a very specialized negatively charged sense in American English which is contextually linked to such elements as <PREDICAMENT> <DIFFICULT SITUATION>, especially in police/army lingo where the context *We have a situation here* is interpreted as meaning “We are in trouble (and we need help)”.

4 As shown by the dictionaries of current English usage, the central sense of the noun *institution* is defined as ‘an organization created for business or science’. Yet, when non-modified the noun is usually used with reference either to an orphanage, old-age home or mental hospital, and again in each of these cases one may certainly speak about the presence of negative connotations. This semantics of *institution* is a subject of a common Groucho Marx joke: *Marriage is a wonderful institution. But who wants to live in an institution?*

The number of health disorders that have been identified by specialists in the field of medicine is enormous, and they may be classified in a variety of ways. Some of them are characterized by well-defined symptoms while others are asymptomatic dark horses that remain undiagnosed until it is far too late to rein them in. There are minor medical disorders that are easy to cure and get through, and there are severe long-term diseases that are terminal and deadly. Note that there is a group of health disorders that bear a charge of <INPURITY> linked to those who suffer from them. For example, the Bible mentions leprosy as God's punishment, a token of spiritual as well as physical impurity, the unjustified view that remained prevalent in Europe for centuries. Much like the leprosy of the 1980s, that is AIDS, leprosy tended to be associated with such elements of <LOOSE LIFE>, <IMMORALITY> and general degeneracy.

Also in modern times, and all too frequently, physical or mental imperfection continues to be perceived as a stigma. The history of the noun *leprosy* provides a further illustration of semantic alteration triggered by euphemism, because at a certain period of time the noun ceased to be used by medical doctors due to the repulsive connotations that accompanied it, and the term *Hansen's Disease* started to be applied in its stead. Even more so, in the history of the noun *syphilis* there has been an abundance of euphemisms to name the disease, and many of them were coined by doctors as technical terms, such as, for example, *morbus venereus* "venereal disease", *morbus Gallicus* "French disease" or *Cupid's disease*, a very common name for the disease in Victorian times. But, apart from the variety of strictly technical euphemisms, in many languages of the world there are more common euphemisms to name the illness, such as German *Lustseuche* literally, "disease of joy", Spanish *lúes* literally "infection, plague", as well as more popular *mal francés* "French disease". Obviously, a similar mechanism seems to be at work in the semantic evolution of many medical lexical items, especially those that are used for mental disorders (on this issue see, among others, Kleparski and Mosior 2019).

Due to natural causes, like old age, long-term disease, such as cancer or a fatal accident that catches us unawares, our earthly life is terminated one day. Evidently, death in all its manifestations and all that surrounds its mystery is steeped in the network of taboos in many cultural zones. Certain well-rooted myths, such as those of *The Book of Genesis*, tell us how death itself came into the world through the violation of an extra-terrestrial taboo binding in Paradise. In fact, to disguise the mystery of death in less frightening apparel, we employ various better sounding euphemistic tools, such as *decease*, *demise*, *loss* or *passing*, and in the history of English this practice goes a particularly long way. Interestingly, as pointed out in Algeo (2010: 214), the Germanic verb *die* is not even once recorded in the extant Old English texts; however, its absence in surviving documents does not mean that the verb did not exist in Anglo-Saxon times, but rather it provides indirect evidence that it tended to be textually replaced by various roundabout expressions and circumlocutions, such as, for example, *go on a journey*. Interestingly enough, in the history of English the euphemisms for the verb *die* seem to be much more numerous than those for the noun *death*; instead we find such euphemistic coinages as *depart this life*, *succumb*, *pass over* or *pass away*, *stop breathing*, *go the way of all flesh*, *meet one's maker*, *give up the ghost*, *go to Heaven* and others. Also, as a defence mechanism that serves the purpose of reducing maximally the fear of death we tend to make use of dysphemisms, such as, for example, *turn up your toes*, *snuff it*, *join the silent majority* or *kick the bucket*. As stressed by Algeo (2010: 215), such dysphemistic stratagems are aimed to shove away the inevitability of death, poke fun at and trivialise what can be neither avoided nor escaped, and make the notion of death and dying less daunting and more tolerable to us.



### Less Obvious Areas of Taboo

Let us start off by saying that it is nothing else but easy to come up with a handful of euphemistic expressions that are applied to body parts, sexual acts, acts of excretion and death, but there are certainly areas of tabooisation that are not only far less immediately obvious, but also such that are not targeted at human beings but rather their aim is to bowdlerize those that occupy the lower strata of the Great Chain of Being. Substantial evidence gathered in such works as, for example, Wilkinson (2002) shows that names of animals were, and – to a certain degree – still are a taboo area with certain peoples, tribes and professions. And so, especially during the hunting season, taboo rules tend to be strictly observed which means that, for example, the names of deer and other game must not be pronounced under any circumstances. One of the oldest known euphemisms in this area is the noun *bear* which in prehistoric times meant “brown one”. The name goes as far back as Indo-European prehistory when animals were totems, and the use of their names was highly restricted. The Indo-European root for bear, that is *\*rkto-* is continued in Greek as *arctos* and Latin *ursus* (see: Emeneau 1948). However, it has been pointed out by many linguists that this Indo-European root has become lost in the lexical resources of both the Balto-Slavic and Germanic languages. In Slavic languages the present name of the animal goes back to the Old Slavic compound *medvedi* meaning “honey-eater” while in Germanic languages, English *bear*, German *Bär*, Dutch *beer*, Swedish *björn* can all be traced back to the Germanic root *\*beron* meaning “brown”.

The power of language magic has also led Polish hunters to avoid the noun *niedzwiedz* “bear”, and they tend to use such euphemistic synonyms as *miś* “teddy bear” or bury “grey one” instead. That is a result of a superstitious belief that if one pronounces the name of the animal it may either get angry, cause mischief or run away. Holden (2000) directs our attention to the Land of the Rising Sun where Japanese hunters are supposed to observe language taboos when they are stalking game in the forest. Their hunting lingo makes use of a variety of substitute terms to avoid uttering the proscribed animal words. Significantly, many of the tabooed words designate animals of different species, for example a snake (*hebi*) is called a *naga-mono* “long thing”, bear (*kuma*) is called *oyaji* “father”, the euphemistic *yase* “lean” is used instead of wolf (*okami*), and the of-phrase *yama-no-negi* “priest of the mountain” is employed to refer to hare (*usagi*). In anthropology such patterns of hunting taboos tend to be universal, and they must ultimately be treated as a verbal tactic to obscure the hunter’s intentions, or – more precisely – their usage rules are motivated by the fear that the hunted animals may understand the hunters’ speech and know that the hunters are up to no good.

Yet, some authors attribute much more to animal taboo than the function of individual protection of those who prey on game. For example, in a recent paper Nijhawan and Mihi (2020) discuss the phenomenon of animal taboo in the Indian Idu Mishmi community, and their main conclusion is that Idu animal taboo rules ensure that people understand and accept the fact that human well-being is inextricably linked to restrictive hunting. More specifically, it is believed that any act of taboo violation may not only bring misfortune to the violator, but also to all kin the perpetrator lives with. The authors conclude that animal taboos form the moral and practical basis of interaction between individual members of the community, spirits and animals. Hence, taboo rules are not perceived here as an isolated component of the local culture, but rather they form part and parcel of the community and one of its organizing principles.

When we move down to the lower strata of the Great Chain of Being, we see that the snake has been subject to taboo among many peoples in the world. No wonder, one could say, because the poisonous snakes take second place – after spiders – in terms of evoking human dread on the fear scale. When we consider the history of the relevant animal vocabulary in Germanic languages, such as English *snake*, Danish *snog*, Swedish *snok*, we come to the conclusion that present-day forms derive from the Germanic verb *snak-an* “to creep” while Proto-Slavic *zmija* “viper” which is continued in many Slavic languages, such as Polish *żmija*, Czech *zmije*, Slovak *zmija*, Kashubian *żmija*, is etymologically linked with *zemlja* “earth”, and the original sense of the lexical item in Polish was “an earth-creeping reptile” (see: Boryś 2006).

Obviously, at present the threat and fear of dangerous animals has decreased considerably, but recent manifestations of old fears are there for all to see. Hollman (2009: 532) discusses the example of the southern English county of Dorset where – after the release of the film production titled *Wallace and Gromit: The Curse of the Were Rabbit* in 2005 – the local authorities strongly objected to posters being put up with the film title because the British stone quarry industry had experienced many problems caused by rabbits’ burrowing habit, and hence rabbits locally came to be considered to bring ill-luck. As a result, the people of Portland, the area famous for its stone worldwide, would rather call rabbits *those furry things* or *underground mutton*. In reaction to the public attitude the film producers decided to take heed of the local feelings and – instead of advertising the full original title – they agreed not to use the dreaded *r*-word *rabbit* in the local teaser adverts, but rather they put to use the *b*-word *bunny*.

### **Emotions: The All-pervading Extralinguistic Factor at Work**

The cases of meaning change signalled here in the context of taboo and euphemism areas allow us to stress that many of the semantic developments do follow the paths delineated not by the language itself, but rather by the language-external factors, motivations and forces that belong to human cognition, such as conceptualization, categorization, embodiment, etc. In other words, one has grounds to claim that many semantic changes are extralinguistically motivated, and their origin is in no way motivated by some language-dependent patterns and conditions.

As hinted earlier, both taboo and euphemism are influenced by the working of overt and covert social rules, socio-cultural and psychological factors. Especially, with the growing power of political correctness, almost on a daily basis more and more specific circumstances arise when the use of some lexical item comes to be interdicted by the rules imposed by the society, a certain segment of a given society or those who have much to say on the dos and don’ts of a given society or its fragment. In effect, nowadays more than ever before, one may speak about the growing force and overriding density of the maze created by the rules of political correctness. In this context let us quote Grzegza (2002) who insightfully argues that:

The notion of “political correctness” is on the edge of societal and institutional reasons and could theoretically be subsumed under these two. However, political correctness is, first of all, a term that is so well embedded in modern thinking and, second, a notion that stands out because it refers entirely to human beings (and derivable terms) that it should be listed as a separate motive [of lexical choices]. When speaking of “nigger”, for instance, political correctness can be regarded as the modern form of taboo. (Grzegza 2002: 1036)

The issue that should by no means be ignored in any discussion of taboo and euphemisation is the role of emotional load in the rise of novel senses. During any act of communication the speaker may freely change the meaning of a word by endowing it with a (greater) tinge of emotional colouring, suiting the state of mind or the mood he is in at the moment of speaking. More than half a century ago, Ullmann (1962) stressed that many semantic innovations have their roots in some more permanent feature of the speaker's mental make-up, such as individual emotive and taboo factors, but – at the same time – the author also realistically notes that:

Some of the psychological factors involved are superficial or even trivial. A chance similarity which catches the eye, a humorous association which comes to the mind, may produce an image which, because of its appropriateness or its expressive quality, will pass from individual style into common usage. The idea that something has a vague resemblance to a horse – in shape, situation or character – has inspired many graphic or jocular metaphors and idioms: 'clothes-horse', 'horse-fish', 'horse-tail', 'horse-play', 'horse-sense', 'to flog a dead horse', 'to mount the high horse', 'to look a gift horse in the mouth', etc. Such metaphors will sometimes result in a permanent change of meaning: the painter's easel, for example, comes from the Dutch word 'ezel' which means an 'ass' (cf. German 'Esel'). (Ullmann 1962: 201)

It seems that this generalization has lost none of its topicality, and there is a general agreement that emotive factors play a vital role in the rise of pejoratively and amelioratively loaded senses. In fact, Stern (1931: 411) claimed that pejorative developments are more emotive in character than ameliorative ones, and that the causes triggering pejorative extensions are to be sought in circumstances when the user of a language finds one or more of the characteristics of the referent disadvantageous, contemptible or ridiculous. McColl Millar (2015: 37) discusses the history of *villain*, *churl* and *boor* which once in the past all meant 'farm worker', yet – with time – the last two dropped in rank from the relatively high 'farm-worker', but because of the city-slickers' habitual contempt for their unsophisticated country cousins, they have all become insults of varying intensity. Note that at present something very much the same seems to be going on with the English noun *peasant*, because although we can still today refer to impoverished farmers by employing the English *peasant* without any element of slight, but – simultaneously one can say *You peasant!!* when a wish arises to insult someone on the grounds of his/her humble origin, social status and/or behavioural patterns.

Beyond doubt, emotions provide a trigger for many euphemisation-conditioned semantic changes, though obviously not all, and neither do emotions alone suffice for the semantic innovations to be accepted. The operation that issues a final clearance to the general acceptance of a given semantic novelty is what has been referred to by some as logomachy. In his discussion of its nature, Hughes (1992) draws our attention to the fact that in present-day societies there is often a period of what he calls *logomachy*, that is "the war of words", that is fought after the innovation hits the market, and the tug-of-war to the general acceptance of the novel sense starts. Let us stress that lexical meanings are generated within a given speech community, but the spread and gradual acceptance of lexical and semantic innovations is both mediated and monitored by the broadly-understood forces of oligarchic, social and moral control.

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