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STYLISTIC MECHANISMS IN THE FORMATION OF DYSPHEMISMS

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ABSTRACT: *Dysphemism refers to the choice of an expression that is intentionally harsh, derogatory, or socially marked in comparison with a neutral or euphemistic alternative. While dysphemisms are often treated as "rude words," they are more accurately understood as stylistically motivated constructions whose negative force is produced by a set of semantic, pragmatic, and rhetorical mechanisms. This article provides a detailed account of key stylistic devices involved in dysphemism formation and use: metaphor, metonymy, hyperbole, irony/sarcasm, taboo and vulgar register, pejorative morphology, word-formation strategies, sound symbolism, allusion, and euphemism inversion. For each mechanism, the paper explains (i) the linguistic process, (ii) the pragmatic function (e.g., insult, humiliation, dismissal, social domination, emotional discharge), and (iii) common discourse environments. The analysis demonstrates that dysphemism is not a fixed property of a word alone, but an interactional outcome shaped by intention, context, and evaluative framing.*

KEYWORDS: *dysphemism, stylistic devices, impoliteness, metaphor, metonymy, taboo language, morphology, pragmatics, evaluation*

INTRODUCTION

In everyday communication speakers constantly choose between alternative expressions for the same referent. Compare person vs. idiot, die vs. pass away, or police officer vs. cop (sometimes neutral, sometimes contemptuous depending on context). A dysphemism is typically defined as a negatively loaded choice that is more offensive, more contemptuous, or more emotionally aggressive than a neutral term, often functioning as a "weapon" in interaction (Allan & Burridge, 1991; Allan & Burridge, 2006).

Dysphemisms are important for stylistics because they show how language encodes evaluation and stance. They are equally important for pragmatics because they are not merely lexical items; they are acts: they can insult, blame, ridicule, exclude, or provoke. In many cases, dysphemistic force is produced by rhetorical shaping rather than by a single "bad word." For instance, calling someone a snake depends on metaphor; calling them big mouth depends on metonymy; calling them a complete disaster depends on

hyperbole; calling them a genius (after a mistake) depends on irony.

This article therefore treats dysphemism as a stylistic-pragmatic phenomenon: the same expression may be dysphemistic in one context and neutral or humorous in another (Leech, 1983; Culpeper, 1996). The goal is to explain, mechanism by mechanism, how speakers create dysphemisms and how those dysphemisms work in discourse.

Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative stylistic and pragmatic approach to the analysis of dysphemism. Rather than focusing on a single corpus, the analysis draws on illustrative examples from contemporary English usage across spoken discourse, media texts, literary dialogue, and digital communication. The examples are selected to demonstrate how different stylistic mechanisms contribute to dysphemistic meaning in context.

The analytical framework combines insights from cognitive linguistics, particularly metaphor and metonymy theory, with pragmatics and impoliteness theory. Each mechanism is examined in terms of its linguistic form, its evaluative and pragmatic function, and the discourse conditions under which it becomes dysphemistic. This approach allows for an integrated analysis that accounts for both structural and contextual aspects of dysphemism.

Metaphor plays a central role in the formation of dysphemisms by re-categorizing targets within degrading conceptual frames. Drawing on the cognitive theory of metaphor proposed by Lakoff and Johnson, dysphemistic metaphors map features from negatively evaluated source domains onto human targets. This process constitutes a conceptual attack rather than a neutral description, as it reshapes how the target is understood.

Animalization metaphors are among the most common forms of dysphemistic metaphor. By mapping humans onto animals associated with dirt, greed, cowardice, or danger, speakers lower the target's status and import culturally entrenched negative stereotypes. Objectification metaphors similarly degrade the target by framing them as disposable or worthless objects, thereby removing agency and dignity. Disease and contamination metaphors intensify dysphemistic force by borrowing fear and disgust from medical discourse and encouraging symbolic exclusion or elimination of the target.

These metaphorical strategies intensify blame, simplify moral judgement, justify exclusion, and strengthen group identity through shared evaluative framing.

Metonymy functions as a dysphemistic mechanism by reducing a person or group to a single negatively evaluated feature. Through part-for-whole or attribute-for-person relations, metonymy transforms behavior, appearance, or role into a defining label. This reduction makes the insult appear natural and self-evident.

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Feature-based metonymy replaces individual identity with stigmatized traits, while role- or attire-based metonymy removes individuality altogether and turns the target into a stereotype. The dysphemistic sharpness of metonymy lies in its ability to compress evaluation into easily repeatable labels that support de-individualization, particularly in political, institutional, and conflict-driven discourse.

Hyperbole contributes to dysphemistic meaning by scaling negative judgement beyond literal truth. By exaggerating faults or failures, speakers portray the target as entirely incompetent, hopeless, or disastrous. Hyperbolic dysphemisms rely on maximization, emotional display, and persuasive pressure, often employing absolute quantifiers, intensifiers, and catastrophic nouns. In argumentative contexts, hyperbole functions as a tool for emotional escalation and evaluative reinforcement.

Irony creates dysphemistic meaning through contrast between literal expression and intended evaluation. When positive or polite forms are used to convey negative judgement, the dysphemistic force emerges from the listener's recognition of contextual mismatch. Sarcasm represents an intensified form of irony characterized by a sharper, more humiliating edge.

Irony and sarcasm are particularly effective dysphemistic strategies because they require shared knowledge and inferencing, allowing speakers to attack while maintaining plausible deniability. They also facilitate public humiliation by inviting audience alignment and laughter.

Taboo language serves as a form of stylistic escalation in dysphemistic expression. Words associated with socially prohibited domains carry strong emotional charge, and their deliberate use intensifies bluntness and aggression. Taboo-based dysphemisms derive their force from norm violation, emotional arousal, solidarity signaling, and dominance. However, their dysphemistic effect remains context-dependent, as taboo expressions may function playfully or affiliatively in certain social relationships.

Morphological processes contribute to dysphemism by encoding evaluation within word structure. Pejorative affixes and evaluative formations delegitimize authenticity, competence, or status, while diminutive forms can function dysphemistically by infantilizing or belittling the target. Word-formation strategies such as compounding, clipping, and blending allow speakers to create new dysphemisms that package negative narratives into compact and memorable labels. Humor often enhances the effectiveness of such forms by recruiting audience alignment.

Phonetic characteristics, including harsh consonant clusters, plosives, and abrupt rhythm, can support dysphemistic meaning by reinforcing aggressive stance. Although phonetic shape alone does not create dysphemism, it contributes to perceived rudeness and emotional force

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when combined with evaluative intent and context.

Allusion functions as an indirect dysphemistic strategy by invoking culturally negative references. Through shared cultural knowledge, listeners reconstruct the negative evaluation without explicit statement. This mechanism is particularly effective in public discourse, as it allows speakers to deliver strong judgement while maintaining rhetorical sophistication and indirectness.

Dysphemism often arises through the rejection of euphemistic conventions in favor of blunt lexical choices. Such choices signal coldness, hostility, or moral judgement and may function as critiques of perceived institutional manipulation. Register clash further intensifies dysphemistic effect when low-register language is used in formal contexts, violating expectations of decorum and framing the target as unworthy of respect.

Discussion

The analysis demonstrates that dysphemism operates as a complex interactional strategy rather than a fixed lexical category. Across stylistic mechanisms, dysphemisms consistently function as face-attacking devices, tools of delegitimization, means of emotional discharge, instruments of group alignment, and strategies of conversational control. The effectiveness of dysphemism depends on speaker intention, contextual norms, and shared cultural knowledge, reinforcing the view that dysphemistic meaning emerges from use rather than form alone.

CONCLUSION

This article has shown that dysphemisms emerge through identifiable stylistic mechanisms: metaphor dehumanizes, metonymy reduces identity to a stigmatized trait, hyperbole amplifies blame, irony/sarcasm humiliates through contrast, taboo register escalates force by norm violation, morphology and word-formation build productive derogatory labels, sound symbolism contributes to perceived harshness, allusion insults indirectly, and euphemism inversion weaponizes bluntness and register clash. Taken together, these mechanisms demonstrate that dysphemism is not simply "bad vocabulary" but a complex stylistic resource for expressing evaluation, stance, and power in discourse.

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