Military Euphemisms in English:
Using language as a weapon

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Abstract

Language has long been used as a military tactic to persuade both allied and enemy populations and conceal inconvenient truths in both war and in times of peace. This informal study of military and media documents focuses on euphemistic language used by and about the military to describe their activities. Euphemisms are categorized according to their types, etymologies and themes. These are examined in some detail in order to shed light on how they are used to persuade and/or conceal information. Euphemistic terminology is shown to display a variety of fascinating linguistic and cultural histories, and their analyses can reveal historical, political and cultural insights in their adoption or abandonment by the media and, by extension, the population as a whole.

KEY TERMS: Euphemism, linguistics, sociolinguistics, military, terminology, media

要　旨

言語は、戦時中や平時において敵味方双方を説得するためや不都合な事実を隠ぺいするための軍事戦術として、長らく使用されて来た。この論文は、軍やメディアの文書について非公式な見解をまとめたものだが、軍隊の活動を説明するために、軍（自らが）使用する婉曲表現および軍についての婉曲表現の研究に重点を置く。婉曲表現は、そのタイプ・語源・テーマによって分類することができる。説得や情報隠ぺいのためにどのように婉曲表現が使われているかを明らかにするため、詳細な分析を行う。婉曲表現には、様々な興味深い言語や文化の歴史を見ることができ、その分析からメディア、更には国民全体に使用されたり、されなくなったりするプロセスについて、歴史的、政治的、及び文化的な洞察をもたらしてくれる。

キーワード：婉曲表現、言語学、社会言語学、軍隊、用語、メディア

1 Introduction

In 1918 Hiram Johnson, Republican Senator for California, USA, is reported to have stated in a speech, ‘the first casualty when war comes is truth’. The idea even then was not a new one; Greek tragic dramatist Aeschylus (525BC–456BC) is often attributed with the famous quote ‘in war, truth is the first casualty’. Nor indeed is the idea necessarily a Western concept; Chinese military strategist and philosopher Sun Tzu (544–496 BC) wrote that ‘all warfare is based on deception’. No doubt with these and similar ideas in mind, English novelist and essayist George Orwell wrote in his 1946 essay ‘Politics and the English Language’, ‘political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness’. Considering the arguably universal nature of the concept of deception being used as a weapon in war, it is perhaps not surprising to discover that the idea is alive, well and still flourishing in the 21st century. As Chambers (2003) notes, ‘the proliferation of euphemisms in the war of the words over Iraq deserves particular attention’. It is the present informal survey’s contention that the same is equally true of other conflicts, and examines the use of such language by providing an analysis of evident themes as well as categorizations, etymologies and discussion of how euphemism is employed by the military and media reporting on military matters, particularly in relation to recent international conflicts.

David Lloyd George, Liberal Prime Minister of the British Wartime Coalition government, said in 1917 when talking about the reality of war, ‘If people really knew, the war would be stopped tomorrow. But of course they don’t know, and can’t know.’ The use of euphemistic terminology in describing military operations is informed by the queasiness which politicians and the military have in communicating the true horror of war to the citizens they aim to protect. As Keyes (2010) states, ‘warring parties have too much invested in surrounding the harsh realities of combat with clouds of verbal fog’. Enright (2005) further notes that ‘(p)olitics and warfare are full of policies and actions that, in their unadulterated form, may be regarded with some suspicion or even horror by the ordinary citizen…. Language is

brought into full force…. in order to neutralize and sanitize what they have to tell the public.' This has led to the development of their 'own language' in an attempt to not only mollify their own citizens but also to confuse or deceive a perceived enemy. Indeed, in their classic examination of taboo and euphemistic language, Forbidden Words (2006), Allan and Burridge use the term 'militarese' to describe the language employed by and about the military, giving it the suffix '-ese'; therefore implying that it is just as distinct a language as any other '-ese', for example 'Chin*ese*' or 'Portugu*ese*'. They go on to claim that these words and phrases 'are loaded to the point of deception' (ibid).

Additionally, there appears to be a degree of unity of military, political and media circles in the use of such language. When discussing the Iraq conflict, Chambers (2003) refers to an 'extraordinary coalition of politicians…, of military spokespersons…, and finally of media people whose rhetoric in discussing the war in Iraq displays extraordinary consistency, involving often identical terminological inventions and turns of phrasing'. Perhaps an investigation of the language used by these powerful forces in modern life can, as Poole (2006) puts it, teach us 'valuable things about the mindset of the people who employ it'. The current paper represents one such investigation.

In this study, a brief look at definitions and characteristics of euphemisms is followed by examples taken from recent military usage and reporting. This is followed by an examination of themes and metaphors evident therein. After analyzing how certain lexical fields connected with war are addressed euphemistically, some conclusions will be offered.

2 Definitions

The derivation of the word 'euphemism' can be found in the Greek *ευφημία* 'euphemia', meaning 'the use of words of good omen'. This word can be divided into its root words 'eu', meaning 'good', and 'pheme' meaning speech. Together, they have the meaning of giving something that might be perceived as being bad, offensive or taboo a good name. Allan and Burridge (1991) provide the following useful definition;

> ‘A euphemism is used as an alternative to a dispreferred expression, in order to avoid possible loss of face: either one’s own face or, through giving offense, that of the audience, or some third party.’

3.1 Categories

Euphemisms can be categorized in a number of ways, and an examination of the way they are used in military contexts suggests three such major categorizations, which will be discussed and exemplified below. These categorizations are obfuscation, abbreviation and using extant words and phrases in new ways. The following sections examine these categorizations and provide examples from military and media sources.

3.2 Obfuscation

Retreat

An example of obfuscation in the use of euphemisms by and about the military can be seen in the description of the tactic of retreat. Perhaps mindful of the negative associations with this word, and its connotations of defeat, both for the soldiers involved and the people back home in the country they are fighting for, ‘retreat’ is and has seldom been used by sympathetic media in the history of war reporting. Conversely, it is much more likely to be used in connection with the perceived enemy and their tactics. Euphemisms such as ‘disengage with the enemy’, ‘coordinated withdrawal’, ‘phased departure’ and ‘tactical redeployment’ might suggest that the retreat in question was a planned tactical decision, rather than a necessary defensive action in the face of, for example, superior or more numerous enemy troops, both of which options are likely to have a demoralizing effect on troops and interested parties at home. It is further possible to detect a greater urgency of retreat in the phrases ‘uncoordinated withdrawal’ or ‘advance to the rear’, both of which have been used in the reporting of such tactics. As recently as May 2012, the BBC reported on the British troops in Afghanistan being ‘extracted’, which is clearly a euphemism for leaving the area of conflict while the whole region is in a state of extreme turbulence and instability. At any rate, it is probably fair to suggest that the use of these euphemistic phrases serves to indicate

the extreme sensitivity in military circles that is felt towards this sometimes unavoidable tactic.

War on Terror

The naming of the military actions of the US and others after the September 11th 2001 attacks as a 'war on terror' has been argued as being euphemistic; Poole (2006) refers to the phrase as 'exquisitely engineered for public consumption', but perhaps the target of this 'war' is Islamic extremism. Of course, any organization declaring war on a specific religion or believers in that religion, regardless of the strength of their beliefs or their aims, would be rightly condemned by the international community. Euphemizing of this action may be seen as an attempt to sidestep or even avoid such condemnation. However, as Bromwich (2008) points out, there is 'something nonsensical in the idea of waging war on a technique or method', and it is indeed noticeable that references to this phrase in the media have dramatically reduced in recent years.

3.3 Abbreviation

CD, BOB, WMD, IED

According to Allan and Burridge (1991), 'euphemism can be achieved through antithetical means, such as by circumlocution and abbreviation, acronym or even complete omission', and it is certainly noticeable that both military terminology and its reporting in the media employs a high frequency of abbreviation. Examples of these might include 'CD' for the already euphemized 'collateral damage' (discussed elsewhere in this paper), 'BOB', again for the euphemism of 'blue on blue' (see below), 'WMD' for 'weapon of mass destruction', 'IED' for 'Improvised Explosive Device', more easily understood as 'roadside bomb'. Indeed, a quick Google search can easily provide thousands of examples of military abbreviations. While the employment of abbreviations undoubtedly increases efficiency in the often chaotic and hectic battlefield, their use in the media can be argued to create jargon which may confuse or mislead the non-specialist, thus having the effect of concealing the harsh reality they often seek to portray.

3.4 Using old words in new ways

Embedding

Chambers (2003) suggests that ‘the military euphemism that misfired most visibly was probably the ‘embedding’ of journalists within units of the army’. This actually refers to journalists being given access to allied troops and operations during military action, but only limited access to information. He argues that this misfire was due to the fact that the ‘verb to embed and its derived forms are uncommon enough to draw attention to themselves and to set off a search for their meaning—which is the last thing one wants with a euphemism’. In a disarmingly frank comment about this euphemistic policy, Lt. Col. Rick Long of the U.S. Marine Corps stated in 2004 that, ‘frankly, our job is to win the war. Part of that is information warfare. So we are going to attempt to dominate the information environment’. It appears that one way of dominating the ‘information environment’ is to employ terminology in new ways, but with arguably mixed success.

4.1 Themes evident in military euphemisms

This section looks in more detail at some of the themes that are revealed by an examination of the euphemisms connected with the military and its media reporting. Four themes are discussed here; dehumanizing of the enemy, hygiene, medicine and business.

4.2 Dehumanizing of the enemy

Military terms for enemy forces often display a tendency to attempt to dehumanize them, with the probable intention of strengthening the moral basis for military aggression. Heard (2012) claims that ‘the US military encourages the dehumanisation of the enemy because it’s psychologically easier to kill a foe that has been divested of his human qualities.’ One way to dehumanize the enemy is to attribute some abstract quality of moral inferiority to them. This can be exemplified by two phrases which have been coined during and after the Iraq War, namely ‘Coalition of the Willing’ and ‘Axis of Evil’; the former referring to largely US and British forces and the latter referring in a seemingly arbitrary way to countries which at the time

were deemed to be enemies of the US, namely Iran, Iraq and North Korea.

The phrase 'Coalition of the Willing' came into prominence with the advent of the Iraq War and suggests a large group of countries risking danger in uniting to combat a mutual enemy. The reality was that there were only four countries which actually contributed troops to the conflict in Iraq, but the use of this phrase may give the mistaken impression that there were troops of many more countries in action there. Although at different times there were as many as 49 members of this 'coalition', presumably this phrase was used to deflect attention away from the fact that this was largely a US and UK based aggression.

The phrase 'Axis of evil' appears to have been first used by then US President George W. Bush in his State of the Union speech in 2002, although it is likely to be more attributed to his speech writer, David Frum. The use of the word 'evil' here shows an attempt to take the moral high ground in the days leading up to the Iraq war.

There is a corollary to the use of this phrase which also gained traction in 2005 when then US Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice referred to a revised list of enemies of the US as 'Outposts of Tyranny', again, the implication being that there was an inherently evil quality to the leaderships of the countries in question, and that they were soon to be eliminated.

4.3 Hygiene metaphor

Poole (2006) suggests that the military attitude towards the enemy is that they 'are filth: removing them is an act of hygiene'. The hygiene metaphor is often evident in euphemisms to hide and disguise the shocking reality of the barbarity of war and armed conflict.

This theme has significant historical examples from Stalinist Russia, Nazi Germany among others. Orwell (perhaps unwittingly) used the phrase 'Russian purges' which itself is actually a euphemistic term for the extreme political repression carried out by Stalin's forces between 1937 and 1938. The origin of the word 'purge' comes from Latin *purigare* (to purify), but the historical reality paints a much darker and more sinister picture. Statistics differ, but according to Ellmann (2002), 'the best estimate that can be made of

the number of repression deaths in 1937–8 is the range 950,000 –1.2 million, i.e. about a million'. Rather than 'purge', 'genocide' might perhaps be a more appropriate and accurate description of such a period of ruthless oppression. Nevertheless, the term 'purge' has arguably become subsequently associated with this period in Russian history, and serves as an example of pejoration, or a euphemism that has been contaminated by that which is signified, as described by Allan and Burridge (1991); this 'usually results from society's perception of a word's tainted denotatum contaminating the word itself'.

The cleansing metaphor was further utilized in Nazi Germany, where similar terms were used for areas from which the Jewish population had been removed to concentration camps as *judenrein* or 'clean of Jews'.

The hygiene metaphor is also evident in more recent conflicts. Possibly the most notorious euphemism to be employed in recent times in military history is the deeply disturbing term 'ethnic cleansing'. This phrase originates from a translation from the Serbo-Croat phrase *etnicko ciscenje* and refers to 'purging, by mass expulsion or killing, of one ethnic or religious group by another, esp. from an area of former cohabitation' in the Oxford English Dictionary, and came to be widely known from late 1991 and early 1992 as the extent of the reality of brutality in the former Yugoslavia became public. However, the practice that this ghoulish euphemism refers to appears to have a longer history than this, with similar repressive actions being carried out in previous conflicts in the Balkan area. Judah (1997) claims that the first usage of the word 'cleanse' in this context was by 19th century Serbian philologist Vuk Stefanović Karadžić to describe treatment of Turkish people in Belgrade in 1806. Implied here is the idea that some ethnic groupings are unclean or infected and that the land needs to be cleared of this undesirable group. The use of the word 'cleanse' as opposed to 'clean' here is seemingly deliberate; it has a connotation of religious or moral purification. The term still invites controversy, with Poole asserting that to use the phrase 'constituted verbal collaboration in mass murder' (2006). However, it would be reasonable to suggest that the term refers to a number of policies in addition to killing, for example causing physical or mental harm to a group of people and mass deportation.

There appears still to be an ongoing debate as to whether ‘ethnic cleansing’ corresponds to and is synonymous with ‘genocide’. The fact that ‘genocide’ was used by many to refer to the Holocaust brought about by Nazi Germany may well have necessitated the usage of a new term, as this appalling period in history is understandably a very emotional issue and it may not be appropriate to draw comparisons to other events in recent history. It remains to be seen how the usage of this term will develop and change, but it is fair to contend that it will always be synonymous with one of the darkest chapters of post-war European history.

The hygiene metaphor has been used in other ways to hide or obfuscate military operations and tactics. ‘To cleanse an area’ refers to the action of freeing an area from enemy occupation, again implying that the enemy is dirty, something to be removed hygienically. ‘To dry clean’ has the meaning of carrying out reconnaissance before a military action, and to ‘decontaminate’ refers to a post-battle removal of evidence of any wrongdoing on the part of the victors. The notion here is that any unwanted or incriminating evidence is dirty and must be dealt with accordingly. Of course, there would rightfully be public outcry from independent observers if this activity were to be discovered, thus rendering the necessity of its euphemization, and this exemplifies Keyes’ notion that ‘any sophisticated modern warrior realizes that proper choice of evasive words is an essential part of a coordinated military strategy’ (2010).

4.4 Medical metaphor

Another noticeable theme in the use of euphemism in describing military policy and tactics is that of medicine and health. The word ‘operation’ can be used medically to describe a surgical intervention as part of treatment of a patient, but it can also be used militarily to denote an action such as deploying troops or ordinance. As Poole (2006) notes, ‘this medical sense predates the military usage by nearly four hundred years’. Chambers (2003) suggests that this word ‘sanitises … messy little colonial-style wars and other military interventions’.

The phrase ‘surgical strike’ has been used to describe military operations

such as bombing from the air ‘supposedly as accurate as the first incision of the scalpel’ (Holder, 2007). This phrase was used widely in both Iraq wars, but was also used to describe an attack on Libya’s then leader Colonel Gaddafi’s compound in 1986. This phrase appears to have a long history of usage by the military. Indeed, it seems to have been first used during American discussions of the Cuban crisis of 1962, and gained widespread use during the subsequent Vietnam War. The use of this phrase to denote military action seems to have a number of intended implications in how it might be interpreted by people through the media. First, the idea of surgery implies precision, in the sense that medical surgery is meticulously planned beforehand to be of maximum benefit to one specific area of the patient’s body with a minimum of risk of injury or harm to any other area. Similarly, when a military operation is described as a surgical strike, it is likely that the viewer will conjure up images of a skilful surgeon working with a scalpel, possibly under a microscope in sterile surroundings, rather than the reality of the military scenario, namely bombing, explosions, fire, death and injury. A second implication of the use of this phrase is that it is painless. Under normal conditions a medical operation is carried out under local or general anesthetic, thereby ensuring a patient’s comfort throughout an invasive procedure. By using this phrase in a military context, it is likely that a viewer of reports in the media will make this mental association, perhaps extrapolating that no people might have been hurt or killed in the operation in question, as if weapons had been developed which could somehow destroy armaments or military facilities without injury or loss of life. Another implication from the use of this phrase is the idea that in a medical operation, the surgeon is attempting to heal sickness or injury. By extension, it can be interpreted that the military is acting in a benevolent, healing manner when in fact it is causing death, injury and destruction through its delivery of ordnance.

4.5 Business

In addition to the recurrent metaphors of hygiene and medicine in the reporting of military activity, a further noticeable metaphor is that of business and industry. For example, civilians killed in conflicts have been described as

‘regrettable by-products’, as if their death were part of an industrial process. Bombing an enemy position is described as a ‘dispatch of ordinance’; the suggestion or implication here is that such lethal artillery had been ordered by a client (in this case the enemy soldiers) and that the attacking forces were simply fulfilling their part of a business deal. Similarly, missiles and bombs are said to be ‘delivered’, again suggesting that this is somehow a business transaction rather than a military attack.

The term ‘mercenary’, indicating a soldier who is prepared to fight for any army on condition of being well paid, regardless of nationality or political standpoint, has become tarnished, so new euphemisms using the business metaphor appear to have developed. There has been a move towards describing such people as ‘civilian contractors’ who work for ‘security firms’. Whether these phrases will in turn become contaminated by the reality of what they signify remains to be seen.

At the same time as examining the use of the business metaphor in war, it is also worth noticing how, in reverse, military terminology has been incorporated into the world of work and business. Examples of this might include phrases such as ‘to fire someone’ referring to the idea of ‘to sack or dismiss someone’, a common occurrence an the world of work, which according to Oxford English Dictionary was first recorded in 1885, whereas its military usage dates back much earlier, with the first recorded instance being attributable to Shakespeare in Love’s Labour’s Lost (1588); ‘Is that Lead slow which is fir’d from a Gunne?’, or possibly even earlier.

Another example of how military jargon has been adopted in the business world is the idea of a ‘corporate raid’. A ‘raid’ is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as a ‘military expedition on horseback; a hostile and predatory incursion, properly of mounted men’ and its etymology from Old English “rad” is shared with that of the current English ‘road’. In the business world ‘corporate raid’ describes purchasing a significant amount of shares in a business and then using the concomitant voting rights to push forward policies that increase the value of those shares.

As exemplified above, the existence not only of the business metaphor in the military but also that of the military metaphor in business suggests

a strong connection between the two, perhaps explained by their mutual prevalence in their reporting in the media.

5.1 Lexical fields for specific areas of military reporting

In addition to providing a categorization of military euphemisms in terms of their qualities such as obfuscation, abbreviation or new uses of existing words as well as emergent themes such as dehumanization, hygiene, medicine and business, this paper will now go on to provide an analysis of how certain aspects of war and conflict are euphemized. These aspects, namely justification of war, accidents, torture, death and injury, killing of the enemy, prisons and prisoners, combatants, espionage and artillery are all unpleasant and often hidden, but nevertheless are arguably ever-present in armed conflict, and therefore seemingly appropriate for euphemistic treatment.

5.2 Euphemistic expressions for justification of war

The taboo of war, brought about by the horrors of the reality of such episodes has encouraged a burgeoning of euphemisms to counteract it. This is surely an attempt to avoid a panic reaction in a country's populace. A political leader may state that there had been a 'commencement of military operations' or that their forces were involved in an 'armed conflict' or 'armed struggle'. Chambers (2003) argues that colonial-style military interventions, such as the US–Vietnam, France–Algeria and Russia–Chechnya conflicts, 'made 'war' itself, once a noble term, a somewhat dirty term', and so therefore something to be avoided explicitly.

The choice of terminology in justifying military action is important as it gives an indication of the political standpoint of the individual or organization that makes such choices. Phrases such as 'regime change', 'liberation', 'incursion', 'freedom' and 'defence' have all been used as such justification for what is essentially an 'invasion'. This latter term appears to have negative connotations for the belligerent side, thus necessitating such euphemistic usages. The following sections examine a number of these euphemistic devices.

5.3 Regime change

Initially, the US Iraq Liberation Act of 1998 stated that 'It should be the policy of the United States to support efforts to remove the regime headed by Saddam Hussein'. The notion of *removing* a regime became softened to the euphemistic 'regime *change*', which Chambers (2003) describes as 'a euphemism for the deliberate and violent overthrow of an internationally recognized government'. It is perhaps unnecessary to point out that in order to change a regime, government or leader, it is crucial to remove them first.

Poole (2006) notes that the term 'regime' 'connotates disapproval', although formerly and formally it carried a more neutral meaning. It implies an authoritarian or dictatorial nature, and 'to call a government a 'regime' nowadays is to say that it is somehow illegitimate' (ibid) and therefore, by extension, a legitimate target for military activities. As can often be the case, however, this phrase also came into the parlance of the anti-Bush movement before the US invasion of Iraq, with the emergence of bumper stickers ironically claiming that 'regime change begins at home'.

5.4 Liberation

Another word used in the justification of military action is 'liberation'. Here the implication is that many or all of the people in the country to be attacked are looking to the invading country to free them from their tyrannous leader(s), and are therefore in favour of such an invasion. A further implication here is that the attacking side is acting at the behest of these downtrodden civilians and that it has a moral duty to help them. However, the implied supportive attitude of these civilians in the Iraq war is not borne out by the fact that an opinion poll in 2007 revealed that over 50% of Iraqi respondents disagreed with the invasion and continuing occupation of their country by US led allied forces.

5.5 Incursion

The start of the US war in Vietnam was officially known as an 'incursion' rather than an invasion. This is not strictly a euphemism, as its etymology lies in the Medieval French word 'incourir' (to run into), but it is nonetheless

likely that the fact that it is less well used than the word ‘invasion’ may have helped in the choice of this nomenclature.

5.6 Freedom, Boots, Enforcement

The military name for the second war in Iraq was Operation Iraqi Freedom, itself a euphemism, although as Poole (2006) wryly notes, there were plans within the American military to name it “Operation Iraqi Liberation” until ‘an eagle-eyed functionary spotted that this spelt OIL’. Any association between the Iraq wars and oil would clearly be detrimental to the credibility of the claim that the war’s aim was more altruistic. Subsequent to the Iraq war was the conflict in Libya, which was not invaded on land, but as the British newspaper The Daily Mail reported on March 2011, there were ‘strong hints that the UN-backed alliance was preparing to put ‘boots on the ground’—a euphemism for invasion and occupation’. Here, this is no reference to a delivery of footwear, rather a euphemistic way of describing the placement of troops on Libyan soil, or even more explicitly, invasion. The Libyan conflict, also known in some circles as a ‘military intervention’ saw a tactic euphemistically referred to as ‘enforcing a no-fly zone’, approved by the UN Security Council on March 17th 2011. In reality, this tactic was to bomb and attack strategic and military targets from the air, but the term ‘enforcing’ makes no reference to military action, rather suggesting a simple policing of the area. However, estimates on civilian deaths from this ‘enforcement’ vary wildly, but according to NATO at least 60 civilians were killed and 55 injured as a result. This can be seen as another example of using euphemism to hide the military reality from those consuming its media reporting.

5.7 Defence

The use of the word ‘defence/defense’ (UK and US spelling) serves as a further example of how word choice can imply a political position. The war on Iraq and other military exploits have been described in some circles as ‘defending the homeland’. It would be reasonable to assume that this would be a reference to some kind of domestic military conflict, but the theatre for this defence was in reality thousands of miles away in a different continent.

The increase in the euphemistic use of the word ‘defence’ for ‘attack’ has increased in modern times. After the end of the Second World War, the US ‘Department of War’ became the ‘Department of Defense’ and the British ‘War Office’ became the ‘Ministry of Defence’ in 1964. Since these name changes, both countries have been at war at various times, but there has been no reversion to their previous names, perhaps because of the strong emotions in the electorate that the word ‘war’ imparts. Likewise, the word ‘army’ seems to undergoing the process of being replaced by ‘defence forces’. This is perhaps an eerily ironic echo of Orwell (1948)’s naming of the military wing of Oceania’s government ‘Ministry of Peace’ in his classic deconstruction of totalitarianism, ‘Nineteen Eighty-Four’.

5.8 Accidents

Perhaps one of the most controversial aspects of the use of euphemism in the military conflict is the way in which ‘accidents’ are reported in the media. These ‘accidents’ might include unintentional death or injury of either civilians or members of the same army or forces.

Taking first the idea of unintended death or injury of civilians in the country where the war is being fought, in the Vietnam War these unfortunate victims were referred to as ‘regrettable by-products’. This dehumanizes the accident, and makes it easier for the population back home to rationalize these individual human tragedies as unfortunate but necessary consequences of a war started by their evil leaders. More famously, the term ‘collateral damage’ was first introduced in a 1975 USAF lexicon to accompany the SALT talks between the US and the old Soviet Union. As noted earlier, this euphemism is often even further euphemized by its abbreviation to ‘CD’. Poole describes this as a ‘horrifying phrase in its euphemistic efficiency’ (2006), while Keyes (2010) claims that this term ‘has lost its blandly euphemistic flavor’, and this is perhaps because the phrase has continued to be used in more recent conflicts by NATO, including, at the time of writing, those in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Libya. Perhaps this phrase is an example of Pinker (2007)’s ‘euphemism treadmill’ whereby a euphemistic phrase becomes tainted with its tabooed referent, and that given time, another, new

euphemism will develop to take its place.

USAF define collateral damage as ‘unintentional damage or incidental damage affecting facilities, equipment, or personnel, occurring as a result of military actions directed against targeted enemy forces or facilities’. Again, this definition appears to dehumanize people in the sense that ‘personnel’ is listed after ‘facilities’ and ‘equipment’; almost as if those non-human assets were deemed more important. According to the Mirriam-Webster online dictionary, the term ‘collateral’ has a meaning of ‘accompanying as secondary or subordinate’. The implication in its use here suggests that the military appears to be avoiding civilian and other unintended death or injury as less prioritized than other military aims. Another dehumanizing aspect of this particular euphemism is the use of the word ‘damage’. This word is most often collocated with non-human objects such as equipment or facilities, and not with human bodies or lives. To collocate people with this word is, as Poole (2006) puts it, ‘to deny their personhood, their existence as individuals, and their crucial difference from inanimate matter’.

As well as the unintended death and injury of civilians, another taboo area of war is the phenomenon of accidental killing of members of the same side or allies in a war. This has notoriously been given the oxymoronic term ‘friendly fire’. Alternatively, the phrase ‘blue on blue’ has been used to describe these unintended tragedies. This phrase appears to have its derivation in terminology used by NATO forces, which were identified by blue pennants during military exercises, as opposed to Warsaw pact militaries which were identified by the colour orange. Both these phrases describe in euphemistic terms military accidents and/or failures, which need to be reported in the media and to affected relatives and loved ones, often in a non-condemnatory, matter-of-fact style. In terms of morale and avoidance of adverse publicity, the use of euphemisms can be seen as evidence of the military perception of these failures as being taboo.

More recently still, there has been an increase in so-called ‘green on blue’ attacks, especially in the Afghanistan conflict. This refers to instances where international allies are killed by Aghan security forces who are officially supposed to be working together in their ‘peace-keeping’ efforts. The

characteristics of this kind of killing seem to be uncertain. This is amply summed up by UK Defence Secretary Philip Hammond's reaction to one such incident in May 2012; 'We don't yet know what the motive was, we don't yet know whether this was an insurgent who'd infiltrated the police or whether it was a policeman who simply had a grievance of some kind'. Nonetheless, the 'blue' here is presumably the same 'blue' as discussed above. The choice of 'green' for the offensive combatant here is intriguing; it could be an attempt to assign a colour to represent revenge, as evidenced by Gen. John Allen, the ISAF commander, when discussing the same incident as above; 'in any case it is prudent for us to recognize that, as you know, revenge is an important dimension in this culture'. It could more simply be a description of Afghan security personnel uniform, but regardless of its origins, its euphemistic usage here can be seen as an attempt to allay domestic fears of negative repercussions of the planned allied withdrawal from Afghanistan, and appears to be another instance of what Keyes (2010) refers to as 'verbal fog'.

5.9 Torture

A constantly controversial issue both during and in the aftermath of the Iraq conflict was the alleged torture and mistreatment of those captured by the Allied forces. One aspect which arguably contributed to this controversy were the euphemistic terms employed by the military and subsequently adopted by the media. As Rejali notes, there is 'a special vocabulary for torture. When people use tortures that are old, they rename them' (2007). In 2006, President George W. Bush referred to techniques designed to extract information from prisoners as 'an alternative set of procedures'. There follows a brief examination of some of the euphemistic phrases used in connection with the military and media reporting of torture, variously referred to as 'enhanced' or 'aggressive interrogation techniques'.

'Abuse' is a term which is widely used in the media to describe either physical or psychological violence conducted in Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib and elsewhere. The term is conveniently vague, as its usage in everyday life can serve to describe mere name calling as well as its more

serious connotations such as child or sexual abuse. As Poole (2006) notes of the term, ‘its generosity of scope obscures the particulars of violent acts’.

Another frequently used term in the media related to torture is ‘stress position’. This phrase has been exemplified by the US military as ‘like standing … for a maximum of four hours’, and therefore appears to be a reasonable way of treating prisoners. However, the reality is that these stress positions may range in brutality of technique, including pinning elbows behind knees, preventing movement for hours on end, or hanging people from ceilings by their wrists which are handcuffed behind their back. Poole (2006) recounts one incident where a prisoner died after 30 minutes of enduring such a horrific ‘stress position’. Away from the military context, the word ‘stress’ is often used in daily life to describe feelings brought about perhaps by overwork or emotional trauma, and these connotations mask the full brutality of these treatments of military prisoners.

The phrase ‘waterboarding’ gained notoriety from the mid 2000s, but the practice refers to a long history of torture techniques using water to simulate drowning, and according to the New York Times journalist William Safire, the phrase appears to have its origins in 1976 in a description of such techniques applied to US Navy trainees as ‘the “water board” torture’, and first became used as a verb in a New York Times article in 2004, ‘The struggle for Iraq: Detainees; Harsh C.I.A. Methods Cited In Top Qaeda Interrogations’, which mentions ‘a technique known as “water boarding,” in which a prisoner is strapped down, forcibly pushed under water and made to believe he might drown’. As this was a new use of a relatively obscure phrase, it was inevitable that there was confusion and a general lack of knowledge as to what this actually signifies. The ‘board’ is what is used to strap the prisoner down, but the phrase brings to mind surfboarding, and, according to Poole (2006), people may be forgiven for interpreting it as a ‘fun action-sports name’.

Perhaps one reason for this collusion between the military and the media in presenting torture by obfuscatory terminology was that journalists seemed to be playing catch-up with the military due to a dearth of information. This lack of information may lead to a situation whereby journalists are ‘too inclined to adopt the foggy jargon used by members of the military because doing so

made them sound in the know' (Keyes, 2010).

Further examples of obfuscation can be seen in an FBI agent's email in 2004, in which there are references to 'sleep "management"' meaning sleep deprivation, 'environmental manipulation' meaning the use of hoods, loud music and/or sensory deprivation. Again, it can be seen that the blandness of the euphemisms belie the true horrific nature of these 'techniques'.

A euphemism synonymous with the Iraq conflict and its aftermath is the phenomenon of 'extraordinary rendition'. This phrase is used to describe the transfer of prisoners from the jurisdiction and custody of one country to another outside normal legal conditions. The second country is then often known to employ torture on these prisoners. This phrase is in fact a double euphemism, as both words mask a darker truth. The term 'rendition' is actually derived from the food processing industry, and describes a process where inedible animal products are treated to extract the fat to produce products such as lard or tallow. Here, it is used in a dehumanizing way (see also above) to refer to the extraction of information through coercive interrogation. 'Extraordinary' in this case is a euphemism for 'extralegal' or perhaps in more common parlance 'illegal'. Again, we can see the employment of euphemistic obfuscatory terminology to describe what to most members of the public would be abominable practices, and indefensible in modern international law.

5.10 Death and injury

In many recent political speeches in the West, the phrases 'the ultimate sacrifice' or 'they laid their lives down' appear frequently as euphemisms for the death of soldiers in war. These phrases are used posthumously to describe those who lose their lives in conflict, but the implication is that their death was in some way both voluntary and inevitable, but the truth is often not so simple. Similarly, and interestingly, this strategy is not necessarily limited to Allied forces and their associated media. Al Quaeda and other similar organizations refer to their members who die in attacks as 'martyrs', albeit in translation. This can be seen as an attempt to legitimize and stress the moral nature (as they see it) of their struggle. Sadly though, in order to be called

a martyr, the truth is that it is necessary to die. These euphemistic phrases avoid the stark reality of the word ‘dead’, and are arguably used to elevate the victims of war as heroes.

As noted earlier, abbreviations are often used by the military, perhaps most noticeably when describing the death or disappearance of its own personnel, and these abbreviations can often be seen in the reporting of such events. Examples of these include ‘MIA’ for ‘Missing In Action’, ‘KIA’ for Killed In Action’ or ‘NYR’ for ‘Not Yet Returned’.

Other euphemistic strategies might include the seemingly bland and neutral ‘combat ineffective’ to describe a soldier killed or injured and therefore of no use to the military campaign. Using these kinds of euphemisms may derive from a desire to lessen the impact of death or injury of the participants of war to their loved ones at home, but it can also be argued that they represent an attempt to reduce public indignation or anger at military failure.

5.11 Shell shock / combat fatigue / PTSD

These terms provide a useful example of what Pinker refers to as the ‘euphemism treadmill’ whereby euphemisms ‘become tainted by their connection to a fraught concept, prompting people to reach for an unspoiled term, which only gets sullied in turn’ (2007). Similarly, Allan and Burridge (1991) refer to ‘contamination’, whereby a phrase becomes too strongly associated with its signifier, thus necessitating a new phrase.

The often reported phenomenon of soldiers’ psychological breakdown after their involvement in combat has been described in different conflicts in different ways. This phenomenon was called ‘shellshock’ during and immediately following the First World War as this nervous exhaustion was thought to have been caused by repeated exposure to explosions of shells on the battlefield. Subsequently, in the Second World War, this phenomenon was given a different name, specifically ‘battle fatigue’ or ‘combat fatigue’. As, in turn, this term became contaminated with the negative connotations of the condition it described, it was replaced during the Vietnam war and other subsequent conflicts with the term Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (or, in its abbreviated form, PSTD). So we can see how different euphemisms

are employed over time for what is largely the same signifier as they become contaminated with the negative connotation that the previous euphemism referred to.

5.12 Killing of the enemy

As well as the euphemistic description of dying discussed above, Abbott (2010) suggests that 'the act of killing … has long had its share of euphemisms'. The reporting of the killing of enemy troops is often shrouded in complex or obfuscatory phraseology. While the death of Allied troops is reported in respectful terms as seen above, Abbott argues that the use of euphemism by the military in describing enemy deaths are 'deliberate attempts to obfuscate military actions, to hide their mistakes and to excuse the perpetrators' (ibid). The military must report these deaths, but to refer directly to them may incur the risk of weakening the moral stance discussed earlier, thus leading to the proliferation of euphemism.

The business metaphor described elsewhere in this paper is continued through the phrase 'to service a target', with the notion that the military is somehow performing an action requested by the 'client', or enemy. The phrases 'liquidate' or 'neutralize' are described by Keyes (2010) as the 'ideal euphemism: ambiguous, multipurposed, context specific'. The controversial use of drones (itself a euphemism for remotely controlled, unmanned armed aircraft and examined later) in the recent Afghan conflict and at the time of writing, the ongoing attacks in Pakistan, has allowed the US and others to 'dynamically address' targets. The perhaps well known euphemistic phrase 'to take out the enemy' is another case in point. At no stage are the Allied forces attempting to extract them from the area alive as the phrase implies; what is being referred to is the sometimes unmentionable, and therefore prone to euphemization, reality of killing enemy forces.

Also interesting to note with regard to the euphemization of killing is a further example of Pinker's 'euphemism treadmill' (2007). Beard (2003) tabulates how these euphemisms have changed over time and provides approximate dates for their usage;

Table 1

Euphemisms for military killing verbs over the last 70 years

Euphemism	Approximate date
take care of	40s–50s
take for a ride	40s–50s
rub out	50s
bump off	50s
knock off	60s
eliminate	60s
waste	70s
smoke	70s
blow away	70s
off	80s
hit	80s
clip	90s
whack	90s
neutralize	Current military

Table adapted from Beard (2003).

It would only seem safe to predict that the current phraseology will, like its predecessors, become sullied and necessarily change in the future as demand for new euphemisms for killing in war is unlikely to be sated.

5.13 Prisons and prisoners

The recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, among others, have seen a proliferation of phraseology to describe captured enemy troops and the places in which they are interred. Nomenclature here has political and legal implications, and it is clear that great care has been taken to avoid the established term POW (prisoner of war). In particular, the proliferation of the term ‘detainee’, not prisoner of war, has enabled Allied powers to treat them with little regard for their rights that the more established term might entitle them to. As Enright (2005) points out, the Geneva Convention ‘states that prisoners of war are not criminals, and should be treated humanely and

released at the end of hostilities'. He goes on to mention that 'calling such prisoners 'detainees' denies them that protection' (ibid). This usage has in turn developed into the phrase 'ghost detainees', denoting those unfortunate enough to be interred in places such as Bagram, Abu Ghraib or Fallujah, so called 'black sites' (incidentally, another euphemism for unacknowledged prisons). The use of the phrase 'ghost detainees' appears to be another instance of a common theme in euphemistic phrases in connection with the military; notably the dehumanization of the enemy discussed earlier in the present study.

5.14 Combatants

The naming of the participants of war, both friendly and enemy, is rich with the usage of euphemisms. As well as the dehumanization of the enemy (dealt with elsewhere in this paper), themes include affirmative terms for troops allied to the same side and obfuscatory and/or derogatory terms for those fighting against them.

By calling enemy fighters in the Iraq war 'enemy combatants' as opposed to say, 'soldiers' or 'military personnel', the Allied forces neatly avoided according these people the status of prisoners of war, and thus all the protection that the Geneva Convention provides. Also, this phrase appears to be an attempt to blur the lines between army troops, terrorist groups and armed civilians, thus in some way making it less clear who the war is actually being fought against and also, perhaps more sinisterly, a roundabout way of justifying civilian as well as military casualties.

Depending on the point of view of the user, differing terms are used for the same subject. What from one point of view might be a 'terrorist' might be a 'freedom fighter' or 'rebel' from another. Similarly, the term 'guerrilla' could be used to describe what others might call an 'insurgent'. What might be a 'crusader' to one might be an 'invader' or 'pillager' to another. So what actually lies behind the choice of these terms? The notion of a 'freedom fighter' fits neatly into the idea of euphemisms discussed in the present study. This term has been used by supporters of those who are engaged in physical and military violence in an attempt to overthrow what they see as an unjust

government. These same people might be referred to as ‘terrorists’ by the same government or their supporters. Fighting for freedom has implications of heroism, self-sacrifice, and even martyrdom. On the other hand, the term ‘terrorist’ can be argued to have implications of cowardice and corruption. These, despite the person or movement being identified by these two terms, are actually one and the same and is yet another example of how euphemism can be used as a weapon in conflict.

5.15 Espionage and covert operations

Espionage and gathering information about the enemy have long been and continue to be a fundamental part of warfare from ancient times up until the present day, and perhaps because of their necessarily covert nature, have been responsible for the development of a large amount of euphemistic terminology. This information enjoys the euphemism ‘intelligence’, which has become so commonplace as to have possibly become almost a synonym in real terms.

The information gathered is also subject to euphemistic categorisation. Instead of the word ‘secret’, military organizations tend to refer to this information as ‘classified’, derived from the notion that certain information is categorized into how available it should be to different levels of the organization. From this term comes the necessary corollaries ‘unclassified’, meaning information in general usage and therefore not secret, and ‘declassified’, indicating information that was at one time secret but has been subsequently made publicly available.

Perhaps for obvious security reasons, the people involved in such information gathering are seldom referred to by their employers as ‘spies’. Rather, they are more obliquely described using terms such as ‘agent’ or ‘asset’. An ‘agent’ is referred to as ‘one who (or that which) acts or exerts power’ by the Oxford English Dictionary but its first use in espionage terms is attested as recently as 1916. The term ‘asset’ is often used to describe property or a positive aspect of someone’s personality or role in an organization, for example ‘his knowledge of grammar is an *asset* in his job as a language teacher’ or ‘she is very hardworking and an invaluable *asset* to the

company'. Both of the terms 'agent' and 'asset' share the quality of somehow dehumanizing what they signify, perhaps to act as a protective euphemistic cover for what they describe.

As part of their role, these 'agents' are occasionally required to carry out more active tasks than information gathering, such as assassinations. Naturally, these tasks are illegal and are likely to have diplomatic and military implications if those responsible for their planning or execution are discovered, so this has also been the subject of euphemization, perhaps most notably in the phrases 'wet work' or 'wet operation'. The implication in the use of these phrases is that the work is wet as it involves the spilling of the victim's blood. The phrase is actually a calque of the Russian term *mokroye delo* (wet job) and was made famous by the eponymous 1980's TV drama starring Edward Woodward. The fact that the victim is simply reduced to a source of liquid indicates the rather chilling nature of such activities, but also demonstrates the darkly humorous nature of 'spookspeak', or terminology relating to espionage.

As mentioned above, the very sensitive nature of information gathering and covert operations, often in dangerous or threatening situations, has inevitably led to euphemistic language to describe them, most probably in an attempt to secure the safety of those involved, but it is also arguable that their usage has added to the romantic image that the ordinary person might have of this decidedly intriguing world.

5.16 Artillery

As technology continues to change the environment of war, so euphemisms have continued to change and adapt accordingly. The technology has developed to ever increasingly guarantee success in killing the enemy, but euphemisms for the artillery, namely bombs, bullets and planes attempt to portray them in a more human friendly way. Poole (2006) notes that weapons 'are given names that hide their real functions, since those are considered unspeakable'. The following represents just a few examples of what might fit into this category.

In a spectacular example of this phenomenon, in November 1982 former US

President Reagan gave an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM), which until then had gone under the rather mysterious name ‘Missile X’ during its development and testing, the deeply ironic name ‘The Peacemaker’. The irony of this nomenclature is that far from making peace, this was a missile that had the ‘destructive power of twenty-five Hiroshimas’ (Poole, 2006).

More recently has seen a proliferation of euphemism of both enemy and friendly weapons. Enright (2005) notes that the abbreviation ‘IED’ for ‘Improvised Explosive Device’ to describe roadside bombs utilized in ambushes is used to ‘reduce their (metaphorical) impact’. Given that around two thirds of Allied fatalities in recent Iraqi and Afghan conflicts have been caused by such devices, it is perhaps telling that this military technical term has become all too familiar among those who follow such events, and this frequency has necessitated the rather anodyne nature of the euphemism to mask the true horrific and prolific nature of the devices, which were in fact responsible for 630 deaths in 2010 in Afghanistan alone.

Euphemisms are also used to mask the deadly nature of their function. An example of this would be the apparently oxymoronic ‘humane weapon’. Quite how weapons can have a humane nature arguably requires extensive use of imagination on the part of the user and also reader or hearer.

The military term ‘smart weapon’ implies an intelligent nature which somehow seemingly guarantees maximum success in protecting innocent civilians during a conflict. However, as Poole (2006) notes, cruise missiles, which come under the category of ‘smart weapons’, were ‘fired at Iraq during the 2003 war landed in Saudi Arabia and Turkey’. Seemingly some of these weapons do not have the intelligence to differentiate between countries, a fact which may lead some to question the validity of their euphemistic nomenclature.

‘Cluster bombs’, a euphemism for an explosive device which distributes what are chillingly given the almost cute and toy-like name ‘bomblets’ are actually the source of continuing controversy. According to the US Pentagon, cluster bombs ‘save lives’ (Schachtman, 2008), but despite this assertion, they are prohibited by the Convention on Cluster Munitions of May 2008. Perhaps the euphemistic terms ‘cluster’ bomb and ‘bomblets’ are part of an

attempt by those countries not yet abiding by this convention to legitimise their continued use.

A further, recent military euphemism which has caught attention in the news media is that of the ‘drone’; a term to describe unmanned planes remotely controlled, often from thousands of miles away. The term ‘drone’ is perhaps derived from its usage to describe male honey bees, which do not have the ability to sting, and are therefore harmless, the implication being that their military counterparts also possess this benign nature.

According to Reuters journalist Kyle Peterson (2009), the US military appears sensitive to the negative connotation of this term, and ‘the push for a new reference to the aircraft has been under way for several years’. This push has attempted to increase the perception of human involvement to phrases such as ‘remotely piloted aircraft’, perhaps to redress the rather humdrum nature of the term which they wish to replace.

6 Conclusion

This paper represents a snapshot of the way selected euphemisms have recently been and still are currently used by and about the military, and it is highly likely that, given their temporary nature, their usage will change over time. Nevertheless, some interesting conclusions can be drawn based on the observations detailed in the current study.

Firstly, militaristic euphemisms can be categorized variously, and this paper has shown that these include obfuscation, abbreviation and using existing words in new ways. Secondly, examination of militaristic euphemisms reveals a number of emerging themes, namely those of dehumanisation, hygiene, medical and business metaphors. Finally, it has been shown that euphemisms are evident in a wide variety of lexical fields describing various aspects of war and military activities. Among those examined in the present study are justification of war, accidents, torture, death and injury, killing of the enemy, prisons and prisoners, combatants, espionage and artillery. All of these areas are shown to be rich in the use of euphemistic terminology.

The current paper’s focus on euphemisms used by and about the military

in terms of their categorization, themes and lexical fields represents a small contribution to the disambiguation of their usage in a response to Abbott (2010)'s call that '(t)he fact that euphemism is so embedded in our political systems makes it all the more important that we should resist it'.

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