

# Euphemism and Its Social-Cultural Background in American English

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## 1. Introduction

Changes in euphemism used to be a kind of “natural change.” Originally, a euphemism was used in connection with taboos. Euphemistic expressions about taboos gradually changed in accordance with the change in people's ways of thinking about them.

But, at present, changes in euphemism occur mainly as “intentional change.” One example is a euphemism used for political reasons. That is to say, a change caused by someone's will, for political, commercial, or other reasons. In the case of “natural change,” it is caused by the changes in its background and surroundings. But in the case of “intentional change,” the causes are someone's will and intention.

### 2.1. The Origin of Euphemism

There is a superstition that a magical connection exists between things and the words that indicate them. At present the superstition seems to have faded out, but it has indeed influenced the origin of euphemism.

The word “Word Realism” means that every word has its original substance. The indication of a thing or a concept is not the only function of a word. A word is thought to have a magical substance according to the concept of “Word Realism.” To speak in a broad sense, the meaning of “Word Realism” is a word's power to influence human beings.

People in olden times were afraid of disasters caused by “Word Fetishism.” They thought a word was not only an indicator; they also thought of it as an influential power. They tried to avoid misfortune by evading the use of direct expressions and using indirect words instead.

People in olden times were literally surrounded by “taboos.” For them, “taboos” existed as the rules for security. The rules had to be obeyed, and could not be broken. By doing so, they could feel a sense of security.

Originally, euphemism was used in connection with taboos. The contents of taboos can be divided into two types. One is “awe of holy things.” Needless to say, people were expected to both

fear and respect things considered holy. They may be a soul, an animal, a star, a head of a village or anything the human mind may have had cause to fear.

The other type is “repulsion towards unclean things” : death, blood, and certain parts of the human body. Taboos thus influenced the first stage of euphemism.

Concerning this kind of taboo, euphemism in its first stage can be divided into two groups. The first being “euphemism in connection with the human body,” and the other “euphemism for evading disaster or unfavorable things.”

“Euphemism in connection with the human body” includes expressions concerning sex, excretion, and birth. This division can be said to be “euphemism regarding nature's call.” Conventionally, people have thought of nature's call, which includes sexual desire, excretion, etc., as shameful. Considering sexual desire to be shameful, people came to use indirect expressions in order to refer to the human body. In some situation, even silence plays a significant role.

When people try to avoid saying words like “death,” “die,” or something referring to death, they think of death as a thing they worry about and want to avoid if they can. In this meaning, euphemism concerning death can be categorized as “euphemism for evading disaster or unfavorable things.” The euphemism used in order to avoid misfortune, including euphemism relating to the taboo of “awe of holy things,” is contained in this category.

## 2.2. Changes in the Usage of Euphemism

The present usage of euphemisms is different from that of the first stage mentioned above. The purpose of this section is to point out the connection between social events and changes in the usage of euphemism.

It can be said that the two types of euphemism in the first stage mentioned above are relating to personal matters. And these two types of euphemism are gradually fading out. Instead of them, at present, euphemism is mainly used with regard to public matters, especially, political and social expressions. I will point out the usage of euphemism in tandem with its social-cultural backgrounds.

Since the Vietnam War, this kind of euphemism has been influenced by political situations in the world. For example, “Make love not war” was an anti-war slogan, which was used by those who were opposed to the Vietnam War. The expression reflects the American counterculture of the 1960s, but “make love” has been invoked in anti-war contexts since.

At present, “make love” mainly means to have a sexual intercourse, which doesn't have anything to do with war contexts.

In the following three sections, euphemisms related to the Vietnam War, the Obama administration, and job terminology are examined.

### 2.2.1. Euphemism relating to the Vietnam War

#### *The Vietnam War*

Following is an excerpt from President Nixon's speech on "Vietnamization" on November 3, 1969.

Or we can persist in our search for a just peace through a negotiated settlement if possible, or through continued implementation of our plan for Vietnamization if necessary a plan in which we will withdraw all our forces from Vietnam on a schedule in accordance with our program, as the South Vietnamese become strong enough to defend their own freedom.

I have chosen this second course.

(Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard Nixon, 1969)

Following the example of the Nuremberg Court which judged the Nazis, the Russell Court was held for the Vietnam War.

According to Bertrand Russell, from the point of view of the people concerned with this war, the Vietnam War was thought to be a necessary and tragic product produced by delay and poverty in South-East Asia. And the cause of this war can be found in the tragic past — the deep-rooted conflict between the North and the South. According to such a view, the interference of the United States was thought to be a coincidence. The Vietnamese people were viewed as a pitiable people. America was forced to interfere, so it was a sorrowful thing.

Russell attacked the kind of view mentioned above. The problem in this conflict is based on racial discrimination. The word "Vietnamization" shows this fact clearly. The expression "Vietnamization" was used concerning this conflict. The meaning of the word is to make the Vietnamese kill each other. One could even say that Genocide was included in the word "Vietnamization." Genocide by napalm bombs and so on was cruelty itself. Added to this, the American government authorities had to make excuses for the war. So many euphemistic expressions were used regarding this war.

Roger Carasso explained the word "Vietnamization" as follows.

"Vietnamization" was all the rage for the defenders of American intervention in Vietnam. Yes, we'll pull out as soon as we've armed and trained our Vietnamese friends.

Except that these corrupt friends were a small minority of the people, as is always the case when a major power intervenes in a civil war on the unpopular side. As soon as it withdraws, its side collapses.

The same mistake is being made in Afghanistan.

*(The New York Times, March 2, 2012)*

### ***Euphemism regarding the Vietnam War***

The Vietnam War was cruel and was connected with political motives, and many experiments were held at the cost of the Vietnamese and their country. In order to hide the political motives and the cruel experiments, the government authorities had to use many euphemistic expressions.

“resources control operation”

This was also called defoliation operation. Chemicals were scattered and plants were killed. The aim was to give the enemy trouble and to stop the food supply.

“weather modification”

Clouds were seeded in order to cause rain; the aim was to cause flooding and to protect bombing missions.

But in spite of such cruel operations, the United States was defeated in this war, in no uncertain terms. The authorities tried to hide the defeat, and to hide the fact of the existence of POWs (prisoner of war).

“We today have concluded an agreement to end the war and bring peace with honor in Vietnam and Southeast Asia .” (The President at that time, Nixon's speech at the Paris peace agreement in 1973)

As a result, this attitude made a “credibility gap” between the leaders and the people.

### **2.2.2. Euphemism made by the Obama administration**

Though the U.S. had “police action” in Korea, “conflict” in Vietnam and “use of force” in Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States Congress hasn't declared war since the 1940s. The relationship between the U.S.A. and Libya has been severely strained since the 2011 Libyan civil

war. The Obama administration had no choice but to use euphemistic expressions mainly for the budget. The following euphemism was made by the Obama administration.

“kinetic operation”

"Kinetic" is an adjective used to describe motion. The Obama administration has borrowed the words from the Bush administration, its predecessor.

"The way I like to put it is, from our standpoint at the Pentagon, we're involved in a limited kinetic operation." (Robert Gates, Defense Secretary)

"Military steps -- and they can be kinetic and non-kinetic, obviously the full range -- are not the only method by which we and the international community are pressuring Gaddafi,"

(Tom Donilon, national security adviser)

On September 11, 2012, which happened to be the eleventh anniversary of the infamous attack on American soil, the U.S. ambassador to Libya and three embassy staff were killed by Islamists blaming America for a film they said insulted the Prophet Mohammad. Following the attack, anti-American demonstrations occurred in Cairo and throughout the Muslim world. The title “kinetic operation” means nothing but war for the Libyan people.

“Overseas Contingency Operations”

The Obama administration prefers using “Overseas Contingency Operation” to using the term “Long War” or “Global War on Terror [GWOT].” The Budget for Fiscal Year 2012 of Obama administration uses the word “Overseas Contingency Operations.” The Obama administration has tried to avoid the term “war.” The administration had no choice but to inherit two foreign wars and now doesn't want to be credited with starting a third.

### 2.2.3. Euphemism relating to Job Terminology

Job titles have been changed according to people's consciousness about their rank in society.

***white collar, blue collar, pink collar, black collar***

“White collar” and “blue collar” have been established. The division “white collar” and “blue collar” mainly deals with almost exclusively male work. Co-related to this division, the word “pink collar” came to be used. “Pink collar” is a general term for jobs mainly performed by women,

such as secretary, typist, sales girls, and so on.

Working women are still disproportionately herded into so-called “pink collar” jobs  
—teaching, clerical and retail sales work. *(Time, 10 August 1964:49)*

“Black collar” also came to be used. Garbage men and so on are included in “black collar.”  
With regard to “black collar,” there are many euphemistic expressions.

Part of the blame can also be traced to the status race, which has virtually eliminated the  
lowly job — at least in name. Only last week, garbage men of Milwaukee, Wis., petitioned the  
city council to be called “public works combustible field man.” When janitors started calling  
themselves custodians, status-seeking library custodians were forced to invent a new title —  
archivist. *(Newsweek, 8 June 1964:64)*

The altered job titles seem to be improved on the surface. The labels are changed, but the  
contents are still the same. The upgrading of terms costs less than the upgrading of the contents.  
For the company it is more convenient to upgrade the terms than to raise their wages. In the field  
of politics, it is convenient to upgrade the terms if the leaders can deflect the complaints of the  
people. So many euphemistic job titles exist in the world today.

Though the expressions mentioned above still exist, the other focus on “white collar” has  
appeared.

Like many white-collar crime investigations, this one has uncovered a trail of e-mails that  
gives a framework, but the recollections of the participants will be crucial to determining  
whether prosecutors can build a criminal case.

*(Building a Criminal Case in the MF Global Affair, New York Times, March 26, 2012)*

If anyone had not already realized it, insider trading is the “hot” white-collar crime these  
days. *(Behind the Crackdown on Insider Trading, New York times, March 1, 2012)*

White Collar, a USA Network television series, has been broadcasted. It premiered on October  
23, 2009, and the series was renewed for a fourth season on August 25, 2011.

A no-nonsense federal agent in the FBI's White Collar Crime Unit, Peter Burke believes in  
earning success the old-fashioned way, with perseverance and hard work.

*(from the character profile of White Collar, a TV drama)*

**executive**

The word “executive” is now often seen in Japanese commercials. The word “executive” in these commercials means “V. I. P.” or “elite.” The usage in Japan is of course derived from the popularity of the word “executive” in the United States. In connection with this word, there is an interesting paragraph.

If you're an executive, you may not be called an executive, but instead, a manager, or president, or vice-president. You may be called a foreman, supervisor, or just “the boss.”

We want to look at the man who's really an executive, not the building janitor who is designated as “Manager of Building Services.”

(Chester Burger : *Survival in the Executive Jungle*, P27)

Job titles which end with the suffix “-ian” or “-ist” are favored above those which end with the suffix “-er.” The reason is based on the nuance of the words. Workers whose job titles end with “-ian” or “-ist” have their special skills in their fields, and the nuance leads to the image that the workers have special abilities. But the suffix “-er,” as the dictionary shows, doesn't have such a nuance, so words ending with “-ian” or “-ist” are favored.

***The Trend of Euphemistic Expressions Regarding Job Terminology***

Words which have a nuance of being in a higher grade in society and a nuance of ability are favored. Such occupations as medical doctor, scholar, and so on, are thought to be highly-ranked in society. Such awareness exists at present, so the expressions which are derived from such occupations are favored. Such occupations as artist are thought to represent creativity, potential, and so on, so the expressions which are derived from such occupations are favored.

***Expressions relating to Unemployment***

The unemployment rate in the United States (9.09% in 2010) is higher than that of Japan (4.87% in 2010). The U.S. hasn't had the lifetime employment system like Japan. So in the United States, changing jobs is not rare. Companies which act as a go-between between a worker and a company — executive-search firms — exist in the U.S. In such conditions, the expression “in between jobs,” which means dismissed, appeared. The Japanese lifetime employment system is changing, and if it becomes more similar to the U.S. system, such expressions as “in between jobs” will appear also in Japan.

### 3. Conclusion

The natural change in euphemism seems to have the tendency to use direct expressions rather than ambiguous expressions, and the intentional change seems to head the opposite way. But these two changes share a common feature, which could be called social-cultural circulation.

The tendency of changing expressions lowers the words' value. At first, a word is changed into another word, and eventually loses its original value. Then the word is again put into another word. After the process repeats several times, in the end, for lower ranked words, new expressions different from the former ones which are direct expressions of their respective ranks, will be used. For the top ranked words, the original expression will remain but with its meaning narrowed and referring to the top position in a very exact sense.

The following is the system for word change (superficial change only):

1. An original expression is disliked and disappears.
2. In place of the original expression, an expression indicating the upper ranked position is used in order to indicate this position.
3. The altered expression loses its original value and it also becomes unpopular and disappears.
4. For the position, an expression indicating a higher rank than the former is used.
5. The expression also loses its original value and disappears.
6. This process repeats for the expression which indicates the higher ranked position.
7. Finally, for the original position, a direct expression which is different from the original expression will be used and the expression which indicates the top ranked position will remain.

The other system is for word change (expansion of intrinsic meaning):

1. An original expression is disliked and disappears.
2. The range of the expression indicating an upper ranked position is expanded to the meaning of lower ranked positions.
3. The expansion refers to the word's original meaning.
4. Finally, the range of meaning of the expression is narrowed back to about the same as its original range.



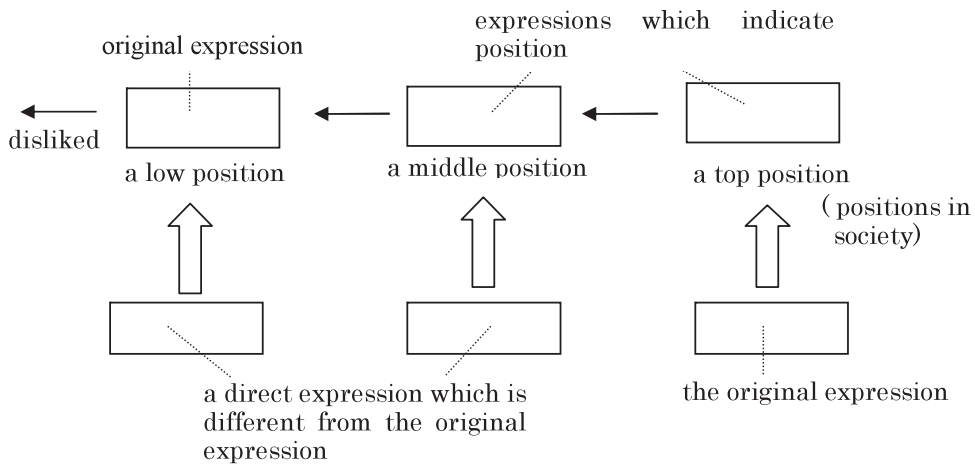


Figure : The mechanism of the replacement of expressions

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## 要 旨

アメリカ英語での婉曲表現の変化に焦点をあて言語の変化と社会の変化の関係を考察する。日常生活の変化に伴う「自然変化」とは異なった、言葉を使う者の意図によって作られる変化、言語の「意図的变化」を取り上げる。戦争に関する婉曲表現が多用されたベトナム戦争に関する政府の表現と、2012年11月6日の大統領選挙で再選を決めたオバマ氏の戦争に関する表現を比較する。また、失業率が高まる中での現状を覆い隠す職業名表現の変化を考察し、社会の変化と語法変化を考察する。タブーなどに見られる「自然変化」の婉曲表現は婉曲表現を使わず事実を表現する方向に向かい、戦争の表現などに見られる政治的な「意図的变化」がなされた婉曲表現は事実を曖昧に表現する方向に向かっており、その両者は逆の方向に向かってるように映るが、婉曲語の変化としては共通性がある。

## Abstract

Focusing on the change in euphemism, I have explored the relationships between the change in language and the change in society. I have focused on “intentional change,” which is made in accordance with the speakers' will. The above change is different from “natural change,” which derives from the change in daily life. I have compared euphemistic expressions about the Vietnam War and those used by the Obama Administration. Barack Obama was re-elected for a second term on November 6, 2012. And I have also explored the change in job terminologies, which makes the ambiguity of the actual economic situation recording the high rate of job dismissal. The natural change in euphemism seems to have the tendency to use direct expressions rather than ambiguous expressions, and the intentional change seems to head the opposite way. But these two changes share a common feature, which could be called social-cultural circulation.