EUPHEMISTIC REPLACEMENT AS COMMUNICATIVE STRATEGY IN THE NEWS MEDIA

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In the modern era of mass media, news reports spread at an unprecedented speed, enabling people worldwide to get informed about current events. Despite the positive results of keeping media audience updated, in some complicated political situations, the ease at which news stories are formulated and made public may aggravate tension, harming the processes of political regulation or negotiation. In view of this, the use of unbiased and inoffensive language of news reporting is of paramount importance. Hence, the aim of the present research is to study the communicative strategy of mitigating meaning via euphemistic replacement in the news media. It is assumed that by replacing the informative units that nominate or describe dramatic and disastrous events with their euphemistic substitutes, the negative effect of the content can be minimised. The research is carried out on the material of articles distributed online by the media company Politico. The topic of the articles covers the dramatic humanitarian crisis in Artsakh (Nagorno Karabah region). The contextual analysis of the practical material is carried out from pragma-stylistic perspective. Euphemism is viewed not only as a figure of speech which serves a social regulatory function in the news media, but also as a tactical tool which pursues the communicative strategy of mitigating sensitive information and creating implied contextual meaning. The communicative-pragmatic study of the language data enables to conclude that euphemistic substitution is an effective communicative strategy aimed at maintaining a neutral stance on the conflict news stories and imparting implicit meaning.

Keywords: *euphemistic substitution, communicative strategy, pragmatics, mass media, news reporting.*

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Introduction

In the modern era of mass media, the speed of news reporting has greatly increased, enabling people worldwide to get informed about current events. Despite the positive results of keeping the media audience updated, in some complicated political situations, the ease at which news stories are formulated and made public, may somehow aggravate tension, harming the processes of political regulation or negotiation. Unfortunately, mass media platforms are full of hate speech and aggressive talk which is the result of controversial issues that polarise the modern society. Sadly, many publications increase the growing impatience and develop absence of empathy among people. Words, like weapons, can cause harmful explosions and endanger human lives in everyday life contexts. In conflict situations the influential power of words increases and they can even have the effect of a bombshell. In view of this, the use of unbiased and inoffensive language of reporting in news media is of paramount importance.

Thus, the aim of the present article is to study the communicative strategy of mitigating meaning via euphemistic replacement in news reports. The analysis is based on the hypothesis that the negative effect of the content can be minimised when certain actions, facts, events or realia are presented through deliberate replacement of the language material. Hence euphemistic substitution can be viewed as an effective and vital communicative strategy aimed at maintaining a neutral stance on the conflict news stories (Eliecer, 2014; Mironova, 2016). The present research is carried out on the material of two articles of G. Gavin (2023) distributed online by the media company Politico. The topic of the articles covers the dramatic humanitarian crisis in Artsakh (Nagorno Karabah region). In particular, the recent eruption of this conflict, the blockade of Lachin corridor which resulted in military clashes and ethnic cleansing of the Armenians living in Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) is addressed[1]. The contextual analysis of the practical material is carried out from the pragma-stylistic perspective, viewing euphemism not only as a figure of speech which serves a social regulatory function in the news media, but also as a tactical tool used to mitigate sensitive information and create implied contextual meaning (Galperin, 1981; Warren, 1992; Gasas, 2009; Abbot, 2010). By using ambiguous phrasing, interchangeable words and expressions, or figurative language that mitigate literal meanings, news media reporters try to avoid creating a biased content (Caffi, 1999; Fraser, 2010).

Communicative strategy of mitigating meaning in mass media

It is undeniable that mass media creates public opinion and the persuasive tactic of delivering information via mass media communication often shapes people's minds. Admittedly, the political situation in the South Caucasus is so complicated and explosive that it has gone beyond the limits of political regulation. Therefore, the elucidation of these events by internationally recognized mass media needs special care and cautious approach. Admittedly, the communicative strategy of substituting certain words that might evoke negative emotions on any side of the conflict with neutral ones, expressing hedged ideas, describing the situation vaguely, without explicitly siding with any of the conflicting parties, becomes a matter of language policy for news media that claim to report unbiased and objective information, avoiding display of hate speech or verbal aggression (McGlone & Beck, et al., 2006; Paronyan &Ayunts, 2020). It goes without saying, the journalists who disseminate information via worldwide famous news media like Politico, need to take a neutral stance. Furthermore, they need to be politically accurate and take into consideration certain "silent" factors that underlie the general policy around the problem under question. In particular, in the January 7, 2023 article, which addresses the prolonged blockade of the 120000 Armenians in Artsakh, the European mass media may be constrained by the contracts between EU and Azerbaijan, according to which Europeans receive supplies of energy sources they need as an alternative to Russian gas. Moreover, back in January 2023, EU avoids showing direct interest in the South Caucasus region because of Russia's geopolitical interests and efforts to maintain its dominance there. In the September 26, 2023 article, which addresses the 24-hour lightning war against Artsakh and depopulation of the region, the author of the article tries to camouflage the fact of ethnic cleansing. This brutal act is assuaged as it is not an officially accepted fact, and, quoting Samantha Power's words who visited Armenia and encountered the refugees, "testimony" was already being gathered "from people who have fled violence, deprivation, and with the fear of living under the government of Azerbaijan".

Using a neutral and unbiased language to report information about conflict situations is a hard task. Very often, in order to avoid blames and accusations from one or the other side of the opposing groups, the journalists prefer euphemistic replacement to name certain realia and to describe events or actions. Euphemism is basically a stylistic category which can be defined as

"Word, etc. used in place of one avoided as e. g. offensive, indecent, or alarming" (Matthews, 1997, p. 119). Euphemistic substitution or replacement results in veiling discriminatory, prejudiced or negative opinions and ideas. Due to this creative camouflage of words and phrases, their perception in conflict situations is softened. Euphemisation of meaning functions either for the sake of maintaining polite verbal behavior or in order to manipulate the audience (Hoggart, 1986; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Eliecer, 2005; Paronyan, 2020).

Adopting a pragmatic approach to the conceptualization of euphemistic replacement or substitution in the news media, we propose the assumption that euphemism is not only a figure of speech which serves a social regulatory function in the news media, but also a communicative strategy of hedging used for mitigating sensitive or debatable information. Furthermore, euphemistic substitution, besides disguising certain negative or offensive content, performs one more communicative strategy. It is used to convey a covert piece of information, some kind of conversational implicature, and thus creates an implied contextual meaning. This strategic mechanism is put to use especially in military, political and international relations contexts in order to simulate political correctness.

In the next part of the article, we will carry out a contextual analysis of the practical material, adopting the pragma-stylistic perspective. We will try to show that figures of language like periphrasis, understatement and metaphor function as tactical tools with the help of which euphemistic substitution is performed. These tactical tools are also used to flout the Gricean maxims of Quantity and Manner and convey implied contextual meaning - conversational implicature (Grice, 1975).

Tactical hedging tools performing euphemistic replacement

In order to reveal the tactical tools that replace certain words and mitigate sensitive contents, we will analyse two articles published by the online journal Politico, which date from January 7, when Azerbaijan blocked the Lachin corridor, to the tragic events of forceful depopulation of Armenians of Karabagh in September 2023.

When we try to interpret the tactical tools, namely, understatement, periphrasis and phraseological restatement that are used to realize the communicative strategy of euphemistic replacement, we can observe that they

are based on flouting Grice's maxims of Quantity and Manner. In case of flouting the Maxim of Quantity by using tactical tools of mitigating meaning, the writer produces either more or less informative content than needed and creates certain conversational implicature. In case of flouting the Maxim of Manner, the writer produces obscure or dubious content which allows for some hidden meaning – conversational implicature.

Let us analyse cases of flouting the Maxim of Manner first. The maxim concerns clarity of expressing meaning and requires to abstain from ambiguity and obscurity. The strategic tool that is used for euphemistic purposes in this case is phraseological replacement performed with the help of phrasal verbs. It is well known that the phrasal verbs and nouns are characteristic of informal speech. They present an idiomatic and covert way of describing actions or events. Hence, they can be seen as phrases that violate the Maxim of Manner and thus describe the acts and events ambiguously, leaving some part of information obscure, in the dark. In the contextual framework of a confrontational topic, when using a phrasal verb instead of a notional verb, the writer's intent becomes vague and ambiguous, giving rise to certain implied content – conversational implicature.

The following titles of the articles contain phrasal verbs which function as a strategic tool of phraseological replacement and hedge the meaning.

(1) *'We know we aren't going back': Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians **face up to** a life in exile*
(2) *Europe **watches on** as humanitarian crisis unfolds in Nagorno-Karabakh.*

In Example (1) the title of the article contains the phrasal verb *face up* which replaces the verb *confront* – to deal with a problem or difficult situation. This phraseological replacement intentionally veils the negative effect of the contextual setting – *a life in exile*. The writer mitigates the unwanted negative effect but creates the implicature that Armenians who are forced to leave homes will suffer hardships. In Example (2) the phrasal verb *to watch on* means to watch an activity or event without taking part in it. In the context of this article, which addresses the act of blockade of Lachin corridor (a brutal impediment by which 120000 people, children, elderly people among them, are deprived of food, medicine, health care, electricity, gas and other vital needs for survival),

this action obtains a great significance. Therefore, the phrasal verb *watch on*, which is a euphemistic substitution, replacing the verbs *to monitor* or *to observe*, implies the inconspicuous role and indifference of Europe concerning the problem formulated by the author – *humanitarian crisis*.

Thus, from the very beginning of the article, the author mildly points at the neutral position of Europe in this matter. Actually, there is one more major player in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan – Russia, with its dubious and hidden aims and peacekeeping troops on the border. Interestingly enough, this inactive role, the role of passive onlookers is ascribed not only to Europe, but to the Russian peacekeepers as well:

> (3) *But now, the regular traffic of cargo supply trucks, buses and banged-up old Ladas laden down with luggage has ground to a halt, and the guards on duty **watch on** as convoy after convoy of Russian peacekeepers and the occasional Red Cross mission rumble past.*
>
> (4) *On December 12, a group of self-described Azerbaijani environmental protesters, most with no apparent record of eco-activism, pushed past the wire fencing and set up camp on the highway as Moscow's military contingent **watched on**.*

Obviously, the aim of the journalist is to keep a neutral stance without siding with any of the conflicting sides. This is a vision from the European perspective, which means that along with the active involvement in the war in Ukraine, EU does not want to get involved in a new conflict where Russia is present – EU is just a mindful observer. The role of the Europeans as passive observers is understandable, the author makes a euphemistic replacement to veil the geopolitical interest of European countries in the South Caucasus. Meanwhile, the inaction of the Russian peacekeepers is questionable as the role of the Russian "military contingent" is to act but not to observe – *watch on*. The Russian peacekeepers stand there in order to guarantee peaceful life in the region but they do nothing to remove the blockade. Hence, by using the phrasal verb *watch on* as a hedging tool, in Examples (3) and (4), the journalist violates the Maxim of Manner and suggests that Russia does not guarantee successful realization of November 9, 2020 agreement of ceasefire signed by Armenia,

Azerbaijan and Russia. Hence, the implicature that Russia does not make any effort to solve the problem and open the Lachin corridor is conveyed.

To keep a neutral stance, the author also tries to mitigate the idea of the blockade. When referring to the act of blockading the Lachin corridor, the author tries to vary the clarity of the formulations. Thus, along with the expressions *blockaded region* and *effective blockade*, the phrasal verbs *close off* and *seal off* are used.

> (5) *For the past month, the so-called Lachin corridor that links Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia* **has been closed off,** *leaving as many as 100,000 people living there under effective blockade, with supplies of food, medicines and other essentials running low.*
> (6) [*…*] *and the region was governed for nearly 30 years as the unrecognized Republic of Artsakh,* **sealed off** *behind defensive lines and accessible through only one mountain road from Armenia.*

Close off and *seal off* are phrasal verbs which name a situation when people or vehicles are stopped from going to a place, they are separated or their entrance is restricted. Obviously, the prevention of people from entering an area or going out may not be a military or a hostile act, preventing people from vital needs. Therefore, the use of these phrasal verbs veils the negative act of blockading but, at the same time, implies on the harmful effects of living *behind defensive lines and accessible through only one mountain road from Armenia* without *supplies of food, medicines and other essentials running low*.

Idioms and lexical stylistic devices can also be treated as hedging tools that violate the Maxim of Manner in that they describe things figuratively, hiding some information and leaving space for ambiguity. The present study has revealed just a few examples of idiomatic language and metaphors.

> (7) *Humanitarian organizations* **are racing against the clock** *to ensure those displaced have food, fuel and shelter.*

The idiom *race against the clock* indicates a situation in which something must happen or be done quickly because little time is available. By

euphemizing the idea of shortage of time, the author creates the implicature that the situation is critical and urgent aid is needed.

> (8) *But now, the regular traffic of cargo supply trucks, buses and banged-up old Ladas laden down with luggage **has ground to a halt**, […].*

The idiom *grind to a halt* figuratively pictures the idea of the blockade, when the road is closed for cars. By blurring the negative effect of deliberate closure of the road, the writer implies that this is a compulsory and enforced act with a negative effect.

> (9) *Turkey has offered full-throated support for its ally, Azerbaijan; meanwhile, Iran has backed its close partner Armenia and fears any change in its immediate neighborhood.*

The metaphor *full-throated support* disguises the role of Turkey in this conflict, but creates the implicature that Turkey boldly sides with Azerbaijan.

Let us go on to analyse cases of flouting the Maxim of Quantity. According to this maxim, the message should be sufficient in order not to create information gaps or to convey excessive or unnecessary information. Cases of understatement are used as a tactical tool for euphemistic replacement that violate the Maxim of Quantity by saying less than necessary.

> (10) *A Kremlin-brokered cease-fire saw 1,500 Russian peacekeepers deployed **to act as a buffer and oversee** the Lachin corridor, now a vital lifeline for the Karabakh Armenians **flanked** on both sides by Azerbaijani-held positions.*

In this passage several cases of understatement can be noted. Firstly, the phrase *to act as a buffer and oversee,* which is used to describe the actions of the Russian peacekeepers. The noun *buffer* is usually used to denote a person or a thing that reduces a shock or protects somebody/something against difficulties. The verb *to oversee* means to watch somebody/something and

make sure that an activity is done correctly. In fact, the role of the Russian peacekeepers is, actually, "to guard" peace on the border, and to "defend" the Karabakh Armenians, to be in charge of peace on the border (which they do not do). Hence, in this passage the expression *to act as a buffer* is a euphemistic replacement of the verbs *to guard* or *to protect*, and the verb *oversee* replaces the verb *supervise*. By making this replacement, the author of the article intentionally says less and mitigates the responsibility of the Russian peacekeepers to unblock the road they are in charge of. This euphemistic substitution, by which the writer says less than needed and hedges the role of Russia, in fact, corresponds with the claims the Russian government made during the blockade, abstaining from any liability. Further, the verb *flanked* replaces the verb *blockade* and euphemises the act of creating a barrier between Artsakh and Armenia and leaving a great number of people without any humanitarian aid. Instead, by using this understatement, the writer of the article lessens the horrible effects of isolating people from the outer world by simply describing that they are *placed*, *flanked on both sides by Azerbaijani-held positions*. Thus, by violating the maxim of Quantity, the author says less than necessary and, in doing so, he implicitly conveys the idea of inaction of the Russian soldiers, their inability to fulfil their duty.

Another hedging tool used in the articles under study is periphrasis (also called circumlocution), by which the Maxim of Quantity is violated in the opposite direction – the writer imparts more information than required. Blockade of the Lachin corridor is one of the central slots in the informative framework of the articles. Therefore, when presenting the verbal interpretation of the events that are happening, the writer euphemises *blockade* both as a verb and a noun. Our analysis has revealed several cases of periphrasis with the help of which the act of blocking the Lachin corridor is euphemised.

> (11) *Azerbaijan maintains that the protests* ***are not hampering the use of the road.***
> (12) *While regional powers decide what to do next, for those* ***trapped in the breakaway region,*** *the specter of an existential threat is growing.*
> (13) *According to Power, Azerbaijan's* ***closure of the only road*** *linking Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia "created*

excruciating humanitarian conditions," and "the attacks of
last week have made a dire situation even worse."

The verb *hamper* has the meaning of hindering, restricting or causing difficulty, but not creating a barrier that stops using the road. Being *trapped* expresses the idea of being kept in a dangerous place or a bad situation. In these passages the author is intentionally wordy and provides a descriptive way of blocking the road. At the same time, the verbs *to hamper* and *to trap* create the implicature that these people are kept against their will, they want to get out of the place but they cannot. In Example (13) *closure of the only road* expresses performance of a temporary act by which the American official implies that it was part of a bigger plan which lasted for a certain period of time.

> (14) *Local authorities were already struggling to cope with*
> *hundreds of people wounded after Azerbaijan **launched a***
> ***military offensive** to capture the region last Tuesday, forcing*
> *its leadership to accept a Russian-mediated surrender*
> *agreement.*

In Example (14) the wordy expression *launched a military offensive* replaces the verb *attacked,* and mitigates the harmful effect of this military action. By making this euphemistic replacement, the writer implies that this hostile action was planned beforehand.

> (15) *Azerbaijan denies its forces **have intentionally harmed***
> *civilians.*

The expression *have intentionally harmed* is a euphemistic replacement of the verb *to abuse* which creates the implicature that there has been violence against the population.

> (16) *The **large-scale displacement of the Karabakh***
> ***population** has complicated efforts to rescue hundreds of*
> *people injured in a fuel depot blast in Nagorno-Karabakh on*
> *Monday night.*

The expression *large-scale displacement of the Karabakh population* is a wordy periphrasis of the terms *depopulation* or *ethnic cleansing* which implicitly imparts the idea that this was a forceful and brutal act done against the will of people. Obviously, by using euphemistic replacement, the aim of the journalist is to keep a neutral stance and not to side with any of the conflicting sides.

Conclusion

Having analysed the tactical tools that perform the communicative strategy of mitigating meaning, we can conclude that by hedging a certain part of meaning with the help of euphemistic replacement, the news reporter managed to soften the edges of the conflicting informative content and to communicate his hidden intent through implicature. Euphemistic replacement is performed by employing the communicative effect of the maxims that regulate the flow of information. By flouting the Maxim of Quantity (in case of understatement or periphrasis), the author imparts more or less information than required and conveys conversational implicature which can be decoded from the context. By flouting the Maxim of Manner (in case of phraseological restatement, idiomatic and figurative language) ambiguity of meaning is created, giving rise to conversational implicature. In this case the readers' educated guess and background knowledge are needed to decode the silent meaning. Therefore, the present study shows that euphemism is not only a figure of speech which serves a social regulatory function in the news media, but also a tactical tool which pursues the communicative strategy of mitigating sensitive information and creating implied contextual meanings. The communicative-pragmatic study of the language data enables us to conclude that euphemistic substitution is an effective communicative strategy aimed at maintaining a neutral stance on the conflict news stories and imparting implicit meaning.

Notes

1. The ethnic and territorial conflict between two neighbouring former Soviet republics in the South Caucasus generated a number of wars and military clashes in the past 30 years after the collapse of the USSR. Artsakh (or Nagorno-Karabakh, as it was called in the former Soviet Union), is a tiny breakthrough region, historically populated by ethnic Armenians but

included in the Republic of Azerbaijan as an autonomous region by the former Soviet leaders. After the collapse of the Soviet Union this region claimed the status of independence. Anyhow, this breakthrough republic is recognized internationally as part of Azerbaijan, which allows for controversial interpretations and makes the objective elucidation of the conflict in mass media strenuous. The Lachin corridor is the only way connecting Artsakh with Armenia and, factually with the rest of the world, and its blockade causes total isolation of the people living there. In September 2023, the whole population of Artsakh was forced to leave their homes and become refugees fleeing from the attacks of the Arzerbaijani army to Armenia.

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ՄԵՂՄԱՍՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՆԵՐԻ ԿԻՐԱՌՈՒՄԸ ՈՐՊԵՍ ՀԱՂՈՐԴԱԿՑԱԿԱՆ ՌԱԶՄԱՎԱՐՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ ԼՐԱՏՎԱՄԻՋՈՑՆԵՐՈՒՄ

Շուշանիկ Պարոնյան
Գևորգ Բարսեղյան

Հոդվածի նպատակն է ուսումնասիրել կոնֆլիկտային իրադրություն-ներին վերաբերող լրատվական ռեպորտաժներում բացահայտ թշնա-մանք, բռնություն կամ դաժանություն նկարագրող բառերը մեղմասու-թյուններով փոխարինելու միջոցով իմաստը մեղմելու հաղորդակցա-կան ռազմավարությունը: Գործաբանական-ոճաբանական քննության

են առնվել Politico համացանցային ամսագրի կայքէջում տպագրված երկու հոդվածներ, որոնցում լուսաբանվում են Ադրբեջանի կողմից Լա-չինի միջանցքի շրջափակումը և արցախահայերի բռնի տեղահանու-թյունը: Մեղմասունությունը դիտվում է ոչ միայն որպես լեզվաոճական միջոց, որը լրատվամիջոցներում խոսքը կարգավորող գործառույթ է կատարում, այլ որպես մարտավարական գործիք, որի օգնությամբ իրականացվում է զգայուն տեղեկատվությունը մեղմելու և ներակա համատեքստային իմաստ ներմուծելու հաղորդակցական ռազմավա-րությունը: Քննությունը ցույց է տալիս, որ մեղմասությունների կիրա-ռումը արդյունավետ հաղորդակցական ռազմավարություն է, որը կոնֆլիկտային լուրեր լուսաբանելիս լրագրողներին թույլ է տալիս թաքնված իմաստ ներակայելով՝ առերևույթ չեզոք դիրքորոշում պահպանել:

   Բանալի բառեր` *մեղմասությո֊ւններով փոխարինում, հաղորդակցա-կան ռազմավարություն, գործառՈւնություն, զանգվածային լրատվամի-ջոցներ, լուրերի հաղորդում:*