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PRAGMATICS OF X-FEMISMS AND RECOGNITION OF INTENTIONS

Показано роль розпізнання інтенцій в інтерпретації екс-фемістичних висловлювань та доводиться, що екс-фемістичне значення висловлювань не зумовлюється семантичним значенням слів та виразів, а повністю залежить від інтенцій, що стоять за їх використанням. Робиться висновок, що цей тип інтенціональної комунікації доцільно тлумачити як прагматичне явище.

Ключові слова: евфемізми, дисфемізми, прагматика, інтенціональність.

Показана роль узнавания интенций в интерпретации экс-фемистических высказываний и доказывается, что экс-фемистическое значение высказываний не обусловлено семантическим значением слов и выражений, а полностью зависит от интенций, что стоят за их использованием. Делается вывод, что этот тип интенциональной коммуникации целесообразно истолковывать как прагматическое явление.

Ключевые слова: эвфемизмы, дисфемизмы, прагматика, интенциональность.

The article shows the role of recognition of intentions in the interpretation of x-phemistic utterances and argues that x-phemistic value of utterances is not a property of the linguistic units used, but entirely depends on intentions underlying their use. A conclusion is made to the effect that this type of intentional communication can be best explained as a pragmatic phenomenon.

Key words: *euphemisms, dysphemisms, pragmatics, intentionality.*

Communicative intentions, which underlie the use of all utterances and make all the difference in what meaning a speaker puts into his/her utterances are of implicit nature. They are known only to the speaker, sometimes only in retrospect or 'post-dicto', and need to be guessed/recognized by the addressees in the process of online interpretation of utterances.

Sometimes hearers may not have necessary background information which would provide necessary tools for recognizing the true intentions behind speaker's utterances as in the following example from "The Big Bang Theory" (S05E16) where the University President is saying that Dr. Sheldon Cooper (who happens to be a workaholic theoretical physicist) is obligated to take a vacation:

Sheldon: But if I don't come in to work, what am I supposed to do with myself?

University President: Read, rest, travel. I hear Afghanistan is nice this time of year.

Sheldon (turning to his friends): Sarcasm?

Howard: No, you should go!

Sheldon is unsure whether to recognize President's utterance about Afghanistan as sarcastic or literally intended, since he has no frame of reference for what Afghanistan is like at that point due to spending most of his time in the laboratory and being oblivious to the ongoing war in that part of the world.

Consider the following exchange from the 'Daily Show with Jon Stewart', October 21, 2008:

Anderson Cooper CNN 360: In recent days McCain and his running mate Sarah Palin have raised the S-word...

Jon Stewart: Oh no you didn't!... Wait, which one... 'sallywag, scoundrel, salsa-dancer, superman'? I'll tell you what, I'm gonna write down the S-word that I think the McCain campaign called Barack Obama and then we'll see if I'm right...

[Cut to McCain and Sarah Palin each charging Barack Obama with being a 'socialist']

By uttering 'S-word' Anderson Cooper actually attempts to communicate that 'socialist' is a forbidden or 'tabooed' word in the 2008 US presidential campaign discourse. That is why it is undesirable to say it out loud as it may be for some reason offensive to the potential audience. Therefore he chooses to cover up the allegedly undesirable or dispreferred lexeme by wording his statement in an opaque manner and letting the hearer derive or "infer" the underlying meaning. This substitution also happens to bear very close resemblance to the way another strongly proscribed derogatory lexeme is commonly replaced by 'the N-word' in discourse.

It appears as if in order for an utterance to be meant as an insult, the speaker must intend the utterance to be an insult and that intention must be, or be capable of being, recognized as such by the object of the insult or a third party. There are however instances when the offensive effect is generated when no offense is intentionally meant. For example, the racial dysphemistic slurs are so "explosively derogatory, enough so that, according to Croom (2011) just hearing them mentioned (as opposed to intentionally used with the purpose of offending someone) can leave one feeling as if they have been made complicit in a morally atrocious act [5, p. 352].

Faced with the S-word hearers can and are very likely to generate an inference to the effect that uttering 'S-word' was a slip of the tongue (in this case 'S-word' will be pragmatically enriched to 'N-word') and that McCain campaign actually resorted to using a racist slur to talk about the African-American presidential candidate Barack Obama. Another possible candidate for the 'slip of the tongue' inferential path, the one Jon Stewart pretends to be following for humorous effect, would be one of the notorious 'four-letter words', the 'F-word'. Since these inferences are of implicit nature the speaker can always deny having communicated them and thereby avoid being responsible for whatever meanings speakers may have derived from that particular utterance. Thus in the above example the McCain campaign can certainly deny having resorted to the racist slur by saying that they did not 'say' anything of the kind.

It is interesting to note in this respect that diachronically, the same linguistic form can trigger activation of totally different frames. Thus, in discourse on the US civil war the 'S'-word would most likely be assigned to the 'slavery' frame and therefore immediately inferentially enriched to the relevant 'slavery' and not to 'socialism'. Within the same frame of civil war, for instance, *agriculture* and *resources* were used to refer to "slavery" in speeches of leaders of confederacy of southern states.

It is also very significant that both 'the S-word', 'the N-word', 'the F-word' and other fig-leaf like cover-ups of this kind, are all used with the definite article 'the'. As Allan and Burridge [3, p. 135] point out, they act like proper names, immediately recognizable to the normal speaker of English despite the fact that there are thousands of words beginning with *n-*, *s-* and *f-*. The N-word is used with the definite article similarly to the way 'the waiter' and 'the check' may be preceded by the definite article as such representations are constituent parts of larger stereotyped sequences of actions that defines a well-known situation which make the specific sets of related assumptions strongly mutually manifest.

Euphemistic language use is necessarily deliberate. "Accidental euphemisms", if there is such a thing, will not be processed as such. Hearers can become aware that a euphemism has been used even without necessarily having to be able to label a discourse string as "euphemistic". They need to become aware of the euphemistic effect in order to metarepresent (understand) it accordingly. This metarepresentation inevitably involves mental representation of the relevant salient (or in relevance-theoretic terms "strongly mutually manifest" in the interlocutors' cognitive environment) of dispreferred alternative expressions instead of which the euphemism has been used.

From a pragmatic standpoint, the x-phemistic value of a linguistic unit is primarily determined by evaluating it within the particular context in which it is uttered. In order to assess the X-phemistic value of an expression (or rather

its utterance), Allan & Burrige [2, p. 21] suggest the hypothetical context of “being polite to a casual acquaintance of the opposite sex in a formal situation in a middle class environment” as one in which a euphemism is likely to be used in place of a ‘dispreferred’ alternative. As we can see, in naming the middle class politeness criterion (MCPC) as the one that establishes a default condition for assessing the X-phemistic value of an expression, Allan and Burrige view context as a situation-specific set of socio-cultural extra-linguistic factors.

Allan and Burrige’s MCPC stems from the view of context as an objective social variable (along with such variables as social status, gender or age of speakers). A similar view is expressed by Fussell who writes that it is typical for the middle class of American society to emphasize the importance of use of euphemisms [7]. Senichkina also considers the importance of socio-cultural variables and suggests that it is possible to test whether a given linguistic unit is a euphemism by applying the following appropriateness conditions: imagining resorting to it while conversing with an interlocutor of a higher social status [1, p. 21]. According to these authors, if a unit is appropriate to use under certain circumstances, fulfills a softening (hedging) function and ameliorates the denotation, then the unit in question is a euphemism. However, when context is viewed from such a static perspective, an objective evaluation of an X-phemistic value or status of a linguistic unit becomes quite problematic as often judgments regarding what may or may not be appropriate in certain situations are individual and differ from person to person, let alone culture to culture or different periods of time [p. 15].

A rather different view of context is assumed by authors like van Dijk and relevance theoreticians, who take a cognitive stance on the issue of how context should be viewed. van Dijk argues that it is not the social situation that influences (or is influenced by) conversation, but the way the participants define such a situation [14, ix]. On his view, contexts are subjective constructs designed and updated in interaction by participants as members of groups and communities. He rightfully observes that if contexts were objective social conditions or constraints, all people in the same social situation would speak in the same way. Thus, van Dijk assumes a cognitive stance towards context as “subjective participant representations of communicative situations” [14, p. 22], not as the communicative situations themselves: “[...] contexts are not some kind of objective social situation, but rather a socially based but subjective construct of participants about the for-them-relevant properties of such a situation, that is, a mental model” [14, p. 56].

Both euphemisms and their axiological opposites, dysphemisms can be used for economy of expression as ‘codes’ and sometimes it is very difficult to establish the exact x-phemistic value of the expression with any degree of objectivity without taking sides. This point can be illustrated by a politically charged expression *anchor baby*, which is as a pejorative substitute for a lengthy “a child born of an immigrant in the United States”, used as a tool by which a family can find legal foothold in the US, since those children are automatically allowed to choose United States citizenship. The term is generally demeaning to both children and their parents as such ‘nicknaming’ is based on a dehumanizing metaphor ascribing human children functions of inanimate anchors – a derogatory reference to the supposed role of the child. It is interesting to note that the fifth edition of the New American Heritage Dictionary initially defined this term, considered to be a racist and deliberate effort to dehumanize immigrant children by many, as neutral:

Anchor Baby, n. A child born to a noncitizen mother in a country that grants automatic citizenship to children born on its soil, especially such a child born to parents seeking to secure eventual citizenship for themselves and often other members of their family.

This sparked controversy in the media and later the label ‘offensive’ was added to the entry in the online version of the dictionary by its editors to show that in uttering this expression speakers can and often do show their negative attitude to this phenomenon.

According to Allan & Burrige (2006), there is no such thing as an absolute taboo, absolute euphemism or dysphemism, which would hold for all cultures and times: “Like euphemism, dysphemism is not necessarily a property of the word itself, but of the way it is used” Allan & Burrige [3, p. 45] and the X-phemistic value of utterances entirely depends on, or in Allan and Burrige’s own words ‘wedded to’ context, place, time and intentions that lurk behind them.

This opinion can also be found in non-scientific discussions of the role of intentionality (often referred to as ‘context’) in interpretation of utterances as seen from the following statement made by the US Supreme Court Justice John Roberts:

People understand <...> that the context matters. People understand that, including children, when they hear a bad word when someone hits their thumb with a hammer, they understand that’s different than having an adult stand in normal conversation and use the words. (attested: The Daily Show 26.01.2012)

Semantic theorists claim that the derogatory content of a slur is part of its literal meaning and that “their derogatory content [...] gets expressed in every context of utterance” [9, p. 416]. This view suggests that the derogatory content of a slur can be explained independently of context [9; p. 10]. In contrast, pragmatic theorists deny that the derogatory content of a slur is part of its literal meaning. Pragmatic theorists typically argue that derogatory content is not part of the literal meaning of the slur, but is rather that which gets implicated or pragmatically communicated by way of the slur. Accordingly, since the pragmatic theorist conceives the derogatory content of a slur to be a pragmatic phenomenon, she denies the semantic theorist’s claim that the derogatory content of a slur can be explained independently of context. Let us examine this in more detail.

In order to produce a euphemism, speakers chose words and expressions from paradigmatic sets of available alternatives within a frame due to more positive psychological connotations associated with their use as a word or expression can be considered euphemistic only relative to some other dispreferred one. Thus, uttering ‘collateral damage’ presupposes a prior rejection of ‘civilians killed as a result of military operations’ as contextually inappropriate. The preferred word or expression *gains meaning from the salience of the dispreference*. The dispreferred representations has to be mentally entertained before producing the preferred one. In other words, uttering “collateral damage” or “African American” anchors the utterance to linguistic and social context by contrasting two possible

worlds where one presupposes the existence of the other. To adapt the cognitive-context principle of inclusion [13] to the ascription of utterance–meaning, the possible world which is defined by the existence of “collateral damage” can only be accessed through the implicitly contrasted possible world of “civilians killed during military operations”.

Allan and Burridge show that there are utterances (locutions), which are dysphemistic while the illocutionary point (the kind of speech act performed *in* uttering something is euphemistic or ‘dysphemistic euphemisms’, e.g. calling a good friend an *old bastard* in English where an allegedly dysphemistic expression can be uttered with the intention of praising and admiring someone’s good luck or wit [3]. Research by Mateo and Yus demonstrated that the use of dysphemisms can be motivated by several various types of intentionality ranging from offense- to interaction- to praise-centered [11].

As we can see from the above discussion, the nature of utterances containing euphemistic lexemes is equivocal, equally capable of offending and praising, depending on intentionality underlying their production. In addition to cases in which a speaker’s dysphemistic intention can be accomplished euphemistically, the opposite is also possible – a euphemistic locution can turn out to have a dysphemistic illocutionary point. This is shown in the following example in which US President Barack Obama tells the talk show host Jay Leno during his appearance on the “Tonight Show” (19.03.09) that he is a decent bowler and that he bowled a 129 score. Jay Leno sarcastically says: “That’s very good, Mr. President.” At that comment by Leno, President Obama laughs and says: “it’s like the Special Olympics or something.”

Here *Special Olympics* is a euphemism for *Olympic games for the physically handicapped* so Obama is actually saying that he bowled like an *invalid* by covering it up with an allegedly euphemistic *special Olympics*. However, in this case this particular expression will function as a dysphemistic euphemism since by using the euphemistic form, the speaker expresses a dysphemistic illocution (attitude):

Obama: *I have been practicing bowling*

Leno: *Really*

Obama: *I bowled a 129*

Leno: *That’s ‘very good’, Mr. President!*

Obama: *That’s like Special Olympics or something. No, listen, I’m making progress on the bowling...* (attested: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZXcgpZwsBPY>)

Although it is true that utterance of such dysphemistic nominations as ethnic slurs is derogatory in most contexts, these dysphemistic locutions are also not always used to derogate. Speakers can and do resort to swearwords and racist slurs as rapport-enhancing in-group solidarity markers (see [6]). They are frequently picked up and appropriated by the very ingroup members that the slur was originally intended to target. Slurs often appear in discourses that attempt to reshape the meanings of these words. For example, African-Americans use the *N-word* as a term of affection and solidarity among themselves. Even non-African American rappers who identify with black hip-hop culture use the otherwise highly offensive word with no detrimental consequences (e.g. white hip-hop artist Eminem).

This certainly only works in contexts in which derogation is understood to be untrue and in such in-group uses, a slur is used to express “mock impoliteness” since it is understood as intentionally non-offensive. The problem is, however, that even such seemingly “benign” circulation of slurs simultaneously serves the purpose of reinforcing their saliency in a vernacular and makes them continually available for malign re-appropriation.

Racist dysphemisms occur when a speaker refers to the hearer or some third person’s race, ethnicity, or nationality in such terms as to cause a face affront, however, they can be disarmed by being used as in-group solidarity markers by the targeted group. Hill juxtaposes ‘slurs’ (intentionally used racial dysphemisms) and gaffes (unintentional dysphemisms). Those accused of uttering slurs can defend themselves against this charge of racism by insisting that the utterance in question is “not a slur.” In the case of gaffes or slips, the defense focuses, not on the words, but on the speaker. The speaker is defended as “not a racist,” but as someone who has uttered racist words without having racist beliefs or intentions. The actual linguistic content of slurs and gaffes can be identical; one commentator’s slur is another’s gaffe. [8, p. 88].

The semantic account of slurs is problematic as it appears unable to explain how it is that slurs can mean something non-derogatory, for instance, how they can communicate non-derogatory meaning between close in-group interlocutors. If derogation is part of the literal content of slurs, how can slurs mean something non-derogatory? Croom argues that although it is true that the utterance of slurs is illegitimate and derogatory in most contexts, sufficient evidence suggests that slurs are not always or exclusively used to derogate [5, p. 1]. In fact, slurs are frequently picked up and appropriated by the very ingroup members that the slur was originally intended to target. This might be done, for instance, as a means for speakers to establish rapport and/or strengthen in-group solidarity. Butler admits that slurs carry an immense burden of history. But she argues that, since they cannot be proscribed, the best political strategy is to try to reshape them to new ends, to use them to create new kinds of subjectivity.

Since context can negate a demeaning intention, those accused of uttering slurs can defend themselves against the charge of racism by insisting that the utterance in question is “not a slur.” In such cases the speaker is defended as “not a racist,” but as someone who has uttered racist words without having racist beliefs or intentions.

Why is it permissible for some, particularly African Americans, to use the *N-word* without detrimental consequence? Part of the answer, surely, is that since the speaker is a member of the group being denigrated, the usual presumption of any sort of implied inferiority is removed. Therefore intentions involved in production of utterances or “Who says what to whom and in what context” make all the difference. Considering this, the question naturally arises to the effect that if derogation is part of the semantics of slurs, how can slurs mean something non-derogatory? This situation renders semantic account of slurs problematic as it appears unable to explain how it is that slurs can cause offence in some contexts and reinforce friendship in others.

The use of x-phemisms appears to be intentional in the sense that they are part of conscious linguistic behavior performed for special pragmatic purpose and one can’t be x-phemistic by accident. In order for these strategic conscious

communicative practices to work and be perceived as such, the specific x-phemistic intentionality-attitude underlying their use must be recognized and ascribed to speakers by their audience. In order for a discourse string to give rise to the euphemistic interpretation, its addressees must recognize that a different, stronger and contextually inappropriate word or expressions could have been used instead of the one actually uttered but was not due to face-saving considerations.

According to Rawson euphemisms may sometimes be used unconsciously [12, p. 3]. He notes, however, that instances of such a use include mainly linguistic units that appeared so long ago that hardly anyone remembers the original motivation. Rawson exemplifies this category by such now orthophemistic terms as *cemetery* (from the Greek word for 'sleeping place'), which replaced the more deathly *graveyard* [12, p. 3]. Thus, it is probably safe to presume that in the predominant majority of cases, being euphemistic means behaving intentionally and such verbal behavior can be only be explained from the pragmatic standpoint.

The above view of x-phemistic communication can be summarized by saying that unlike certain grammatical classes, there is no natural class or category of linguistic units, which are intrinsically euphemistic or dysphemistic as any word or expression of a language is potentially open to x-phemistic interpretation depending on the context of its use/the intentionality underlying production of utterances containing them.

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ДО МОДЕЛЮВАННЯ КОНЦЕПТОСФЕРИ “HUMAN RIGHTS”

Досліджується моделювання концептосфери “human rights”. Здійснюється семантичний аналіз репрезентанта концепту. Побудовано лексико-семантичне поле “human rights”. Вирізнено центр і периферію в його структурі.

Ключові слова: концептуальний аналіз, концепт, концептосфера, дефініційний аналіз, лексико-семантичне поле, структура поля.

Исследуется моделирование концептосферы “human rights”. Осуществлен семантический анализ репрезентанта концепта. Выделены центр и периферия в его структуре.

Ключевые слова: концептуальный анализ, концепт, концептосфера, дефиниционный анализ, лексико-семантическое поле, структура поля.

The present paper deals with the conceptual modeling of “human rights” and the semantic analysis of the representant. The lexical-semantic field of “human rights” is compiled and its centre and periphery are differentiated.

Key words: conceptual analysis, concept, conceptual sphere, definitionl analysis lexical-semantic field, LSF structure.