

Euphemisms in advertising discourse: Putting on a positive face and maintaining speech etiquette

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The study describes advertising discourse as unique in terms of its manipulative potential and attempts to observe the way euphemistic units are used in English commercial and social advertising. The authors highlight the two key functions: a 'call-to-action' function of commercial ads and the 'raising awareness' function of social ads. The study relies on the theory of politeness and the concept of face suggested by Brown and Levinson to apply the same principles in the analysis of English advertising texts. The authors consider different categories of goods and end products in both commercial and social advertising discourse to identify the main goals and strategies behind euphemisation as a manipulating mechanism and a language tool allowing to observe the socially accepted standards of speech etiquette.

KEYWORDS: advertising discourse, euphemism, politeness, speech etiquette, manipulation



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1. INTRODUCTION

Manipulation of public opinion is part and parcel of contemporary media space. As the world grows ever more media-centric, the end product delivered to the consumer is often the result of extensive manipulative transformations, and so even though the key objective of publicist writing involves transmitting meaningful information, it never actually ends there, for this objective happens to be complemented by a subordinate goal – that of instilling certain views. Manipulating public opinion will require copious application of

various linguistic and stylistic means, and this is where euphemisation falls under the spotlight as one of the most efficient tools that helps distract the reader's attention through indirect nomination.

Euphemisms are units of secondary denomination used to mitigate unseemly or unpleasant information, or downplay the details that might be perceived as transgressing the rules of speech etiquette (Abbott, 2010). These 'surrogates', for lack of a better word, override spoken or written communication to clear it of linguistic units

bearing shameful or odious connotations.

Although euphemisms perform similar functions in various types of spoken and written interaction, some specific features of euphemisation can be singled out within different institutional discourses. This study is concerned with the way euphemisms operate in commercial and social advertising and aims to identify the key strategies behind euphemisation as a tool of manipulation and a means of observing socially accepted rules speech etiquette.

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study relies on a sample obtained from commercial and social ads in the English language and uses the methods of linguistic observation, continuous sampling and statistical analysis as its key methodological premise.

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

To make observations on advertising discourse or euphemisation techniques, we will first need to properly define what the two phenomena in question actually stand for.

Van Dijk (1998) views discourse as a broad concept and singles out two approaches to its interpretation. On the one hand, discourse is a communicative event emerging amid temporal and contextual limitations and involving two parties (the speaker/writer and the listener/reader).

On the other hand, within a narrower context, it is the result of communicative action taking the shape of the spoken or written text. Van Dijk also suggests that language functions not only within the framework of discourse and its pragmatics, but also in response to multiple social factors, such as public opinion, social status of language users, etc.

The notion of advertising discourse is derived from the general concept of discourse. Advertising texts are intended to promote the values and attitudes of the consumer society, as well as a certain lifestyle or moral choice. In any case, they are always aimed at encouraging the recipient to take action (Sonesson, 2013).

The key distinguishing features of advertising discourse can be listed as follows:

- (1) it is guided by its own structure;
- (2) it bears speech restrictions;
- (3) it is determined by context.

All of which suggests that advertising discourse operates under a set of restrictions that need to be observed vigorously in order to ensure that the end product is as efficient as practically possible, and observing restrictions imposed on advertising texts will require a scrupulous choice of language means and stylistic devices, among which euphemisms are in a class of their own for they are indispensable when it comes to satisfying

censoring constraints.

The process of euphemisation has to do with the speaker's assessment of the subject matter being discussed, and the ultimate verdict will define whether this discussion will require indirect designation of objects and phenomena that might be associated with rudeness, indiscretion, harshness, indecency, etc. (Rawlings et al., 2017). This is a traditional function of euphemisms that defines their important role as markers of politeness applied to observe the standards of speech etiquette in advertising discourse.

Since the original purpose of advertising as a means of information transfer has been expended, it has now evolved to incorporate a number of subtypes, including political, social, commercial, etc., all of which have shaped a specific sphere of communication.

Commercial advertising is designed to make a profit. In addition, it is supposed to promote sales or at least create a market for a product. This suggests that commercial advertising uses its own functional style combining etiquette forms of communication and various stylistic techniques to create public awareness, promote a product, disseminate information concerning the benefits of goods or services, and drive up the demand for these goods and services. To that end, commercial advertising makes use of a certain arsenal of

means and techniques organised into communicative strategies of manipulation.

Any kind of advertising is based on the text, which is designed to perform certain functions, such as:

- the communicative function (any advertising is essentially a message formulated so as to reach the recipient);
- the emotive function (advertising should trigger some feelings or create an aesthetic image);
- the regulatory function (advertising affects the mood and behavioural responses on the part of the consumer).

When the three key functions are fulfilled, the ultimate goal of selling the advertised product is more likely to be achieved.

In modern linguistics, there is no consensus regarding the definition of text as a concept. It is generally perceived as an integral linguistic construct operating on the macro (the broad interpretation of a text as a notion) and micro levels (text as a complex syntactic unity). A text is a reasonably complex statement about the reality, which is based on a judgment about objects and phenomena, about certain facts and situations. All the words in the text, all sentences included in the

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text and the text itself are generally actualised and act as names and statements about specific subjects, facts and situations (Freitas, 2013).

An advertising text is commonly viewed as a specific result of media production and can be presented in any type and genre of media, i.e. a commercial video, a film, a newspaper ad, a poster, etc. It is also different from other types of text since it is created using media language. This is not quite a language in the literal meaning of this term, but rather a complex of means of expression, a set of material and intellectual values in the field of media (Keller & Halkier, 2014).

Like any text, a media text has its own structure, which components are directly interconnected. The structure of the media text depends on the

specifics of the publication or its pragmatic focus. Advertising texts always incorporate a subtext, which is more typical of social, rather than commercial, advertising (Leiss et al., 2013).

Any advertising text must exhibit the following qualities: (1) coherence and integrity; (2) consistency; (3) accuracy; (4) clarity; and (5) comprehensibility. It also bears some specific features, including popularity, visibility, expediency, relevance, contextual and intertextual congruency, and circulation.

Popularity and visibility. The information embedded in an advertising text is intended for the mass consciousness, and therefore in order to attract attention it needs to be ‘closer’ to the audience. Basically, any kind of text designed for a mass audience needs to incorporate something associated with the idea of shared interest, a point of contact between the message and its recipients. Commercial advertising make emphasis on situational relevance, i.e. it relies on specific life situations, while social advertising is mainly about the drama of the narrative, the conflict, and basically more far-reaching realia and circumstances.

Expediency. Advertising texts have their expiration date. In fact, they only operate in the present, because the media relies only on what matters at the moment. This is why advertising texts appeal to

the moment, the here and now, but also form the basis for subsequent decisions.

Relevance. One of the conditions for the viability of the texts that the media operates with is their compliance with the information needs of the audience, their expectations and interests, which is why it is imperative to comprehend both what the public actually wants and what it wishes to hear or read. An irrelevant text that insults feelings or violates the etiquette norms of communication will be considered a downright failure in the industry and will not be able to sell a product or service.

Contextual congruency. Advertising texts are read and perceived only within a specific context, in which communication takes place between the sender of information and its recipient.

Intertextual congruency. A message in mass communication is always a link in an endless chain of messages preceding and following it, a reference to other texts in a continuous cycle of citation.

Circulation. A text of mass communication is always reproduced through replication, for otherwise it will never be able to reach a mass audience and acquire the status of a mass product.

The above features explain the nature of the

advertising text and can be viewed as provisional attributes that classify a text as advertising material. The information in the advertising text is transmitted concisely in order to have a proper effect on the recipient and get attention. Although social and commercial advertising are considered different sub-types of marketing communications, their texts fulfil the same function – to call to action through emotional manipulation (Sivulka, 2011).

The language of media communication evolves from epoch to epoch and yet unfailingly bears a set of features that belong to this genre alone. Typically, advertising texts are designed to be read quickly, which is why they often deploy clichés and repetitive and recognisable vocabulary. To attract attention, these texts are filled with stylistically coloured words and make use of a variety of stylistic devices, among the most common of which are metaphors, metonymy, euphemisms, epithets and comparisons. These devices help create a positive emotional message and uphold etiquette standards, especially where it comes to the language being used to refer to hygienic and medical goods (Beasley & Danesi, 2010).

Speech etiquette is associated with certain rules of linguistic behaviour that should be adopted in a society. Etiquette in general is a set of rules of conduct governing the external manifestations of

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human relationships (dealing with others, forms of greetings, public conduct, manners and clothing). Etiquette is an integral part of the external culture expressed in a detailed system of etiquette norms and rules of courtesy, which includes the developed formulas of speech etiquette (Lambek, 2010). These can be generally accepted and expected phrases, rhetorical questions, polite forms of address, euphemisms, etc.

In today's market economy and the complex process of maintaining product competitive capacity, each brand seeks to occupy a certain niche and provide a sustainable market for their products. In the most general terms, commodities are classified into foods and non-foods, and the least challenging task is to advertise the so-called 'premium' products of both types, such as quality foodstuffs, textile, footwear, printed goods, etc. However, there is a category of products that are quite difficult to advertise. These include medical products made of latex and glues, cosmetics and

pharmaceutical drugs. These products are largely designed to address a problem and are often associated with a number of taboo words and symbols, which discussion violates socially established etiquette standards. This mainly concerns the products designed to eliminate cosmetic imperfections or alleviate the symptoms of a disease. To tackle this challenge, marketing experts and copywriters resort to euphemisation that allows to 'soften sharp corners' and adhere to etiquette norms adopted in a given consumer society (Hojati, 2012).

The theory of politeness suggested by Brown and Levinson (1987), with the concept of 'face' as it key category, considered politeness in the framework of everyday communication, and yet not much actually changes if the same principles are applied to study advertising discourse. Brown and Levinson distinguished between the two types of face as a public image of self:

- positive face, i.e. *'the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others executors'* ;
- negative face, i.e. *'the want of every competent adult member that his actions be unimpeded by others', or 'the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction. i.e. the freedom of action and freedom from imposition'* (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 61-62).

Thus, a 'positive face' is a positive image of oneself in the eyes of society. The same applies to the above categories of goods. In advertising, the positive 'face' of a product must be adequately and positively perceived within a society.

According to the theory, the main task is to preserve and maintain a positive face and for this purpose a strategy of positive politeness is applied.

While positive politeness is aimed at minimising the threat to the positive perception of the advertised product, euphemisation of advertising rhetoric can be viewed as the main principle underlying this strategy.

4. STUDY AND RESULTS

Some of the more representative cases of euphemisation in advertising texts can be found in advertising material promoting cosmetic and medical products. In particular, a rather extensive sample of euphemisms can be obtained by analysing advertising texts promoting anti-ageing goods and products combating exterior imperfections. Thus, the adjective *old* did not occur in the sample at all, despite it being the closest semantically relevant attribute of the very concept of ageing. Instead, euphemisms are used to preserve the positive face of the product and avoid any kind of hostile reaction on the part of the consumer, and most importantly women (Kaur et al., 2013). While socially accepted standards discourage any kind of overt reference to age, most brands tend to refrain from any such allusion.

For example, in their campaign to promote an anti-ageing cream, *Olay* used slogans such as *Give mature skin the extra care it deserves* (Figure 1), thus replacing the semantics of biological decay (*old*) with maturity, defined as '*the state of being mentally and emotionally well-developed, and therefore responsible*' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019).



Figure 1. 'Give mature skin the extra care it deserves' slogan. Copyright © Olay olay.com

Another one of their slogans, *Join me in the battle against ageing* (Figure 2), is also emblematic as it balances out the potentially threatening semantics of *ageing* with the positive metaphorical implication of *battling*.



Figure 2. 'Join me in the battle against ageing' slogan. Copyright © Olay olay.com

The same effect can be observed in advertising texts promoting goods designed to combat exterior imperfections. The slogan by *Clean and Clear* that runs, *Gently wash away skin worries*, is obviously formulated so as to avoid any open reference to the cosmetic problem faced by a large percentage of both women and men. Since rules of etiquette disapprove of any open talk about skin conditions, using any direct reference to *acne* or *acne rash* would clearly have effected product sales in a negative way.

A sensitive category of cosmetic goods are hygiene products. The subject of hygiene and bodily fluids is still a rather provocative one. In terms of etiquette considerations involved, the topic itself is not off-limits, and yet its open discussion is not

entirely welcomed (Keyes, 2010). For example, the topic of menstruation has always been considered taboo, but with social and ethical changes in the society, the attitude to this issue has changed. In many Muslim countries, however, any mention of goods related to personal hygiene during the menstrual cycle is unacceptable, and since on the physiological side this process is associated with something unpleasant and also causes physical discomfort, the direct name carries a negative implication and, accordingly, negative emotions. To avoid any negative interpretation, commercial advertising uses some well-established techniques.

For example, a slogan by *Tampax* runs, *Maybe these colors will distract you from the hell you are going through*. In this case, the semantics of *periods* is softened through metaphorical association of the menstrual flow with *hell*, which means that indirect nomination is introduced because society prefers to not speak overtly about this intimate biological process. Although *hell* cannot be viewed as in any way positive association, in this case it more or less captures the ironic connotation that might ring true with women which will ultimately help save the positive 'face' of the product. In the long run, this helps maintain the idea of common ground and suggest that the people (company) behind the campaign understand what women (the end consumer) are going through and what they are looking for in this kind of product. Other

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euphemisms for the same concept include *these days*, *heavy-flow days*, etc.

Another taboo topic posing a challenge in advertising is contraception. Advertising standards allow a conscious violation of the laws governing the functioning of speech units; therefore, euphemisms are a common stylistic device used in promoting contraceptives.

Such ads often use words with a less pronounced ‘negative load’ or resort to indirect nomination of processes and objects by means of metonymy or word-play. For example, *Durex* introduced an ad for contraceptives – *Get it on* – that never mentioned the advertised item itself (condom), but simply referred to the product as *it* thus mitigating any potential threat to socially accepted etiquette norms. The most frequently occurring euphemisms included metaphors (*orange skin*), metonymy (*it*, *these*, *other*), word-play (*Roger Moore*), irony

(*hell*), and the like.

Unlike commercial advertising that seeks to promote goods and services, social advertising is about highlighting the norms of conduct and addressing global issues requiring public awareness. Before we proceed to consider the cases of euphemisation in social advertising, it is necessary to identify the features distinguishing it from its commercial counterpart.

Firstly, the main goal of social advertising is to draw public attention to a particular, often problematic, phenomenon of public life (Bloor & Bloor, 2013).

Secondly, social advertising is for the most part charitable in nature, meaning that a specific person, or company, or fund does not receive any apparent benefits by placing the social ad. Thus, while the effectiveness of commercial advertising is assessed on the basis of specific market indicators (the level of sales of a service or product), the efficiency of social advertising is assessed based on the level of public awareness about the problem in question (Gregory & Carroll, 2018).

Last but not least, social advertising aims at changing public attitude towards various social phenomena, which implies a different target audience for this kind of promotional campaigns.

Even more so, social advertising is not just about affecting a specific target audience, but is rather about making an impact on the entire society (Johnson, 2012).

In its essence, social advertising is designed to shock and manipulate by appealing to the feelings of fear and anxiety, as well as people's readiness to take action and make a change. Therefore, the basic terms such as *public service advertising* and *public service announcement* have recently found a synonymous term – *fear appeal advertising*, i.e. an advertisement containing an appeal to a feeling of fear, or an ad with a threat.

The common factor uniting commercial and social advertising is the focus towards promoting a particular product, maintaining interest in it. In the case of social advertising, the end 'product' is correlated with public awareness and potential (desirable) change in conduct and/or attitude towards the subject matter in question.

Social ads often purposefully use direct nominations for greater impact. Despite their negative connotation, lexical units such as *kill*, *victim*, *prostitute*, *death*, *black/white*, etc., are widely used in social advertising texts to enhance their suggestive potential.

Suggestion is essentially a process of manipulating the human psyche associated with a weakened

critical thinking in perceiving the suggested content, which does not require a detailed logical analysis or assessment. The manipulative part is enforced by triggering certain states or prompting certain actions. Suggestion is not about affecting the mind of the recipient, but rather about leveraging their feelings.

Any advertising has suggestive potential. Regardless of its type, recipients absorb the pragmatic message behind the suggested information on a subconscious level. In commercial advertising, this message is always associated with maintaining the positive image of the brand and making people purchase the goods (Hackley & Hackley, 2017).

Thus, by deploying its suggestive potential, social ads can affect the feelings and emotions of the target audience through the rational use of stylistic techniques and devices, including euphemisms, which are also encountered in social advertising texts as a most common way around negative language and undesirable connotations.

Social ads concerned with disability issues provide a good sample for the study of euphemisms. For example, *The American Disability Association* has created an ad that shows a stairway of a pedestrian tunnel ornamented with a picture of mountains and captured, *For some this is the Everest. Help build more facilities for disabled people* (Figure 3).

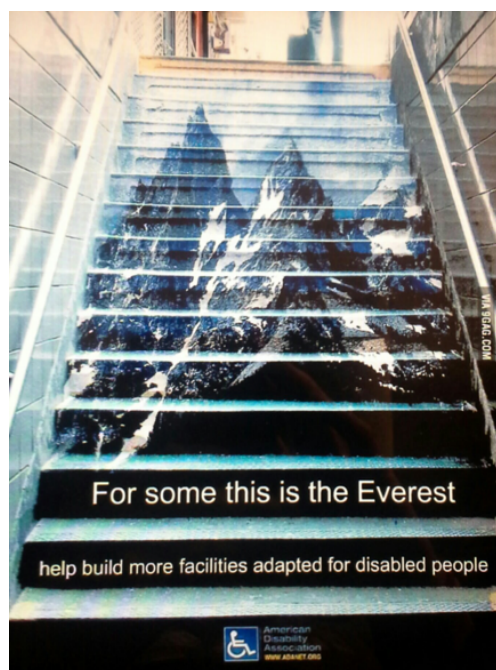


Figure 3. 'For some this is the Everest. Help build more facilities adapted for disabled people' slogan. Copyright © The American Disability Association americandisabilityassociation.org

Since the word *invalid* is taboo, English-speaking social advertising uses euphemisms such as *disabled*, *challenged*, *handicapped*, etc.

The problem of the living conditions for the poor is also addressed in social advertising. The charity organisation H.A.T. – *Helping All Transient* – encourages the audience to join them in helping low-income citizens. In their slogan, *Needy men, women and children don't need the shirt off your back – they just need a pair of shoes from your closet*, the concept of *poor people* is being replaced by the less on-the-nose *needy men, women and children*.

The theme of death is prevalent in social advertising, and although it largely resorts to direct nomination to bring up the concept of passing, euphemisation can still be found in some texts. For example, the social ad designed to raise awareness about dry drowning in children runs, *He said he was sleepy. But he was really slipping away*. To explain that a child may drown after having exited a body of water, the ad uses the euphemism *to slip away*, which not only makes the text more catchy, memorable and recognisable, but also softens the message making it less straightforward and more discreet.

Children of parents who smoke, get to heaven earlier (Figure 4) is a slogan by Child Health Foundation depicting a child with a halo of tobacco overhead. In this case, the direct nomination of *death* and *dying* is avoided by introducing the euphemistic *get to heaven*. Together with the halo symbol it also implies the idea of children viewed as angels, which ultimately adds to the resulting suggestive and persuasive effect. Notably, the strategy that involves using children or the general idea of childhood for suggestive reasons is a rather powerful tool exploited in social ads, and even where life-threatening circumstances are referred to through euphemisation, the resulting message ends up no less meaningful and effective.

The following examples are also helpful in

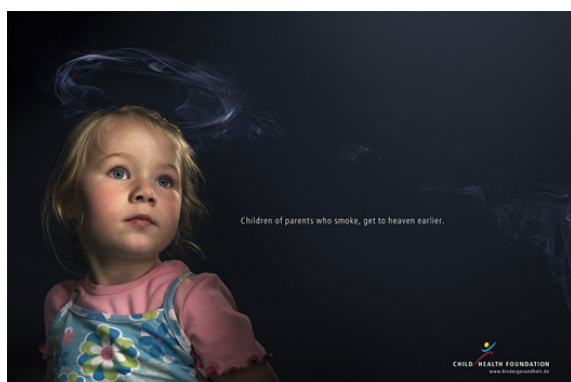


Figure 4. 'Children of parents who smoke, get to heaven earlier' slogan. Copyright © Child Health Foundation kindergesundheit.de

analysing the way the concept of death is euphemised in social advertising. The ad that reads, *One more in the bar. One more in the ground. If you think you're over the limit, you probably are*, reports that drunk driving is fraught with death. The advertisement uses the euphemistic phrase, *one more in the ground*, thus suggesting an association with being buried in the ground (lying in the grave).

The faster you go, the faster you arrive THERE (Figure 5) is the text of a social ad by Romanian Road Police addressing the problem of speeding.

The euphemistic connotation of *there* is supported by the image where the brake and gas pedals are supplemented by a third one shaped as a coffin. Thanks to a combination of verbal and visual components, the resulting message is made stronger and more comprehensible.



Figure 5. 'The faster you go, the faster you arrive THERE' slogan. Copyright © Romanian Road Police politiaromana.ro

Another social ad by Ponle Freno reads, *Drive thinking what's the next bouquet you want to get. Let's keep working for a future with zero roadside bouquets* (Figure 6). The ad plays on the notion of death by using *roadside bouquet* as a euphemism for passing, because a bouquet on the road commonly symbolises the memory of those who died at that spot in a road accident. The idea is strengthened through visual representation where the flowers in a vase in a cosy apartment are contrasted with the flowers laid on the side of the road. The opposition is revealed by comparing positive and negative emotions caused by the same subject – a bunch of flowers – and the suggestive implication behind the message ends up even more prominent considering that *roadside bouquet* has come to have a metaphorical meaning of its own: *'A person who rides any two-wheeled motorised vehicle (scooter, motorcycle, etc.) without a helmet. The word comes from the*



Figure 6. 'Drive thinking what's the next bouquet you want to get. Let's keep working for a future with zero roadside bouquets' slogan. Copyright © Ponle Freno compromiso.atresmedia.com/ ponlefreno

flower arrangements placed on the side of the road where a deadly accident occurred' (Urban Dictionary, 2019).

Since social advertising is intended to draw attention to public issues of importance, one of the subject matters it addresses concerns health problems. For example, a poster designed as part of an advertising campaign against anorexia depicts a physically exhausted girl looking in the mirror, whereas the reflection portrays a corpulent figure, which thus projects the girl's distorted vision of herself making her want to lose weight (Figure 7).



Figure 7. 'Help for people with eating disorders' slogan. Copyright © Ross Brown rossbrownphotographer.com/thumbnail/conceptual/eating_disorder

The poster is captured, *Help for people with eating disorders*, which means it avoids giving names of diseases (anorexia in this case) and 'softens the blow' by generalising the message and labelling the issue from a broader perspective – *eating disorder*.

In both commercial and social advertising, it is unacceptable to use the concept of sexual intercourse and contraceptives in direct nomination. In the following advertisement devoted to the problem of AIDS control, the verbal part of the message is subjected to euphemisation to observe the norms of speech etiquette: *Love life,*

stop AIDS. No action without protection. In this case, *action* is a replacement for *sexual intercourse*, while *protection* means *contraceptive*.

An observation that seemingly contradicts all of the above concerns the cases where language units associated with the detrimental realia and bearing negative connotations are purposefully left ‘unmitigated’ in order to draw attention to the problem at hand through appallingly straightforward rhetoric and intentional renunciation of euphemisms.

For example, the following social ad on alcohol abuse reads, *Every night, binge drinkers put themselves at risk getting into illegal taxis. Don't be a drinkhead. Think more. Drink less*, and clearly has no intention to lighten the message as it uses upfront language, such as *binge drinkers* and *drinkhead* to make the audience stop and reflect.

5. CONCLUSION

The study offered evidence suggesting that while commercial and social advertising may use different language means to observe the standards of speech etiquette, their focus and functions remain the same as any linguistic choice is ultimately aimed at raising awareness and making the target audience reflect and change their behavioural patterns.

Since advertising discourse is inextricably linked

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with pragmatic and extralinguistic factors, it is at all times ‘immersed’ in real-life situations and reflects social realia, which is to a great extent achieved through stylistic devices and techniques being used.

The study has showed that euphemisms are a big part of both social and commercial advertising, although they do carry different messages. When used in commercial ads, euphemisation is largely a tool allowing to describe a product vividly and catchy while at the same time observing etiquette rules. When used in social ads, on the other hand, euphemisms help unveil some problematic social issues of public importance and make people reflect on them.

Whenever euphemisms are not used to mitigate negative connotations, the resulting straightforwardness is commonly a purposeful, intentional strategy designed to shock the target audience that do not expect a direct nomination of phenomena associated with diseases, disabilities, bodily functions, death, child abuse, etc.

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