

CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON POLITICAL EUPHEMISMS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ENGLISH AND UZBEK MEDIA

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Abstract: *This article investigates the use of political euphemisms in English and Uzbek media from a cross-cultural and pragmatic perspective. Euphemisms, as indirect linguistic expressions that soften harsh realities, are particularly prevalent in political discourse where they serve to manipulate, persuade, and obscure truth. Through a qualitative comparative analysis of political news articles, government statements, and televised broadcasts, this study explores how euphemisms function across two distinct linguistic and cultural contexts. While English-language media often deploy euphemisms to maintain diplomatic tone and avoid direct confrontation, Uzbek political discourse relies on euphemisms to preserve social harmony, mitigate criticism, and conform to traditional norms. The findings suggest that euphemisms in both cultures are strategically used to protect political image and control public perception, but the underlying cultural motivations and stylistic realizations differ significantly. This comparative study highlights the role of sociopolitical context in shaping euphemistic language, offering insights into how power, ideology, and cultural norms intersect with communication practices.*

Keywords: *political euphemism • media discourse • pragmatics • cross-cultural comparison • Uzbek media • ideological manipulation • indirect language*

INTRODUCTION

Language is a powerful tool in the construction of political reality. Politicians, government officials, and media outlets strategically choose words not only to inform but also to influence public opinion, justify actions, and maintain ideological dominance. Among the various linguistic tools used in political communication, euphemisms stand out for their subtle yet impactful ability to obscure unpleasant truths, downplay negative events, and frame controversial policies in more acceptable terms. By replacing direct, often uncomfortable expressions with milder alternatives, euphemisms help to control public reaction, protect authority figures from criticism, and ensure social and political stability.

In political contexts, euphemisms serve more than just a face-saving function. They are employed to reframe aggression, minimize accountability, mask failure, and soften public perception of violence, economic problems, or social unrest. As such, euphemisms do not simply avoid taboo or harsh language — they actively shape discourse, ideology, and power relations. Their use reflects deeper socio-political and cultural values, often revealing how a society negotiates sensitive or controversial topics.

This study explores the role of euphemisms in political discourse across two cultural-linguistic landscapes: English-language media and Uzbek-language media. While political euphemisms are common in both, the ways they are constructed, the contexts in which they are used, and the cultural motivations behind their use differ significantly. In English-speaking countries, euphemisms often align with democratic ideals of diplomacy and freedom of speech, even when they serve manipulative purposes. In contrast, euphemisms in Uzbek media tend to reflect collectivist values, respect for authority, and the need to preserve national harmony. The aim of this article is to provide a comparative pragmatic analysis of political euphemisms in English and Uzbek media, examining their forms, functions, and cultural underpinnings.

The study of euphemisms falls within the broader domain of pragmatics, which focuses on how language is used in context to achieve communicative goals. Euphemisms are indirect forms of expression employed to avoid offense, reduce harshness, and negotiate social relationships. From a pragmatic standpoint, they are not merely lexical substitutions but are purposeful speech acts that perform functions such as face-saving, politeness, persuasion, and ideological control. Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness is fundamental to understanding euphemistic language. According to their model, speakers use positive and negative politeness strategies to mitigate threats to the listener's "face" — their public self-image. Euphemisms serve as a form of negative politeness by reducing the force of potentially face-threatening acts, such as criticism, accusations, or unpleasant truths. In political discourse, this becomes particularly important, as leaders must maintain authority while avoiding alienation of the public. Another important framework is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), particularly as developed by scholars like Norman Fairclough (1995) and Teun van Dijk (1998). CDA focuses on how language reflects, reinforces, and challenges power relations in society. Within this perspective, euphemisms are seen not as neutral language choices but as tools for managing ideological narratives, justifying power structures, and legitimizing political decisions. For example, referring to civilian deaths as "collateral damage" functions not only to soften emotional impact but also to justify military action and shift responsibility.

Pragmatic theory also considers the illocutionary force of euphemisms — what a speaker is doing by choosing a certain expression. According to Searle's (1979) speech act theory, language is action, and euphemisms perform indirect speech acts such as mitigating blame, downplaying conflict, or enhancing political acceptability. In war, for instance, "neutralizing a threat" replaces "killing an enemy," allowing the speaker to maintain moral superiority. Cross-cultural pragmatics, as studied by scholars like Anna Wierzbicka and Juliane House, provides insights into how different cultures construct and interpret euphemistic expressions. In high-context cultures like Uzbekistan, where indirectness and respect for authority are emphasized, euphemisms often serve to preserve harmony and avoid confrontation. In contrast, English-speaking cultures may employ euphemisms to maintain diplomacy and political correctness in public discourse.

This theoretical grounding provides the foundation for analyzing political euphemisms as culturally embedded pragmatic tools that serve both linguistic and ideological purposes. The following sections apply these theories to real examples from English and Uzbek media.

In English-language media, political euphemisms are widespread and often serve to manage public perception, protect institutional credibility, and align discourse with broader ideological narratives. These euphemisms frequently appear in official statements, press briefings, political speeches, and journalistic reporting, where the language is carefully curated to maintain neutrality, avoid direct accusations, and soften the impact of negative information. One of the most salient contexts for euphemistic language is military and defense communication. Terms like “collateral damage” (civilian deaths), “enhanced interrogation techniques” (torture), “neutralize the target” (kill), or “kinetic military action” (war) are used to sanitize the brutal realities of armed conflict. Such euphemisms not only obscure the human cost of violence but also allow policymakers to reframe military aggression as necessary, calculated, and even benevolent. These expressions function pragmatically to reduce blame, generate support, and protect political image. In domestic politics, euphemisms are used to mask policy failures or unpopular decisions. For instance, “downsizing” may refer to mass layoffs, while “revenue enhancement” might be used instead of “tax increase.” By using less emotionally charged terms, politicians and institutions aim to soften the psychological impact of their messages and reduce the likelihood of backlash. These euphemisms are often criticized for being deceptive or manipulative, but from a pragmatic viewpoint, they serve clear communicative goals: managing public reactions and maintaining institutional stability. Another important area where euphemisms emerge is immigration and national security. Phrases such as “irregular migrants”, “undocumented persons”, or “enhanced border protection” are used in place of more direct or stigmatizing terms like “illegal immigrants” or “militarized borders.” These lexical choices are shaped by the political ideology of the speaker and are often deployed to frame national policy in a more humanitarian or lawful light. English political discourse also employs euphemisms to address racial, gender, and social issues, particularly in liberal democracies where inclusivity and political correctness are highly valued. Terms such as “economically disadvantaged” (poor), “diverse background” (non-white or immigrant), or “differently abled” (disabled) reflect a sensitivity to language and identity politics. These euphemisms are part of a broader cultural movement to avoid discriminatory or marginalizing expressions.

Overall, euphemisms in English media demonstrate a complex interplay between pragmatics and ideology. While they often serve to protect face and maintain decorum, they also reveal how language is strategically used to shape public discourse, enforce political agendas, and legitimize controversial actions. This pattern is further examined by comparing it with euphemistic strategies in Uzbek media.

In Uzbek-language political media, euphemisms serve vital pragmatic and sociocultural functions that are shaped by the country's historical, political, and ideological landscape. While they share some functions with English-language euphemisms—such as reducing the impact of harsh realities or maintaining political face—they are deeply influenced by Uzbek cultural norms, such as respect for authority, collectivism, and indirect communication. One defining feature of euphemisms in Uzbek media is their role in preserving social harmony and avoiding direct confrontation. In a society where hierarchy, decorum, and public image are highly valued, direct criticism of political leadership or government policies is rare. As a result, journalists and officials often use soft, generalized, and ambiguous language to refer to problems, failures, or controversial events. For instance, instead of explicitly stating that a government agency failed, the media may report that “certain organizational shortcomings were observed” (*muayyan tashkiliy kamchiliklar kuzatildi*), shifting focus away from individual responsibility.

Another common pattern is the use of euphemisms to discuss economic difficulties or social unrest. Rather than directly acknowledging poverty or inflation, the media might refer to “temporary financial challenges” (*moliyaviy muammolar vaqtinchalik tus olgan*), or “adjustments in consumer prices” instead of price hikes.

This type of language softens public dissatisfaction and frames economic issues as manageable and under control.

Similarly, in cases of corruption or criminal activity, euphemisms help avoid damaging reputations. High-ranking officials are rarely described as “corrupt” or “criminal”; instead, phrases like “violations of ethical norms” or “inconsistencies with state interests” are used. For example, a former minister found guilty of embezzlement might be said to have “deviated from the principles of responsible governance” rather than being plainly accused of theft. Euphemisms also play a role in national unity and ideological maintenance. Phrases like “the need to strengthen moral values”, “harmonization of public thought”, or “enhancing the patriotic spirit among youth” are euphemistic ways to refer to political messaging, censorship, or control over education and media narratives. These expressions reflect a political strategy aimed at maintaining ideological cohesion without appearing authoritarian. It is also important to note that Uzbek euphemisms are often constructed using bureaucratic and formal register, making them sound neutral and official, yet vague. The use of passive voice and abstract nouns helps blur agency and responsibility—for example, “laws were not implemented in full” avoids naming who was responsible for the failure. When comparing the use of euphemisms in English and Uzbek political media, several key similarities and differences emerge, reflecting distinct cultural, political, and communicative contexts.

1. Functionality and Purpose

In both English and Uzbek media, euphemisms are used to protect public image, soften negative realities, and manage audience perception. However, the motivations behind these uses differ:

- English media often employ euphemisms to avoid legal liability, maintain political correctness, and influence public opinion in pluralistic societies where media scrutiny and public accountability are strong.

- Uzbek media, on the other hand, use euphemisms primarily to preserve political stability, uphold social order, and respect authority in a more centralized system of governance. Euphemisms often reflect institutional loyalty rather than investigative objectivity.

2. Directness vs Indirectness

- English euphemisms tend to be strategic and policy-driven, often involving terminological substitutions that appeal to neutrality or logic (e.g., “kinetic military action”).

- Uzbek euphemisms are highly indirect and often abstract, relying on passive voice and generalized phrases to blur responsibility (e.g., “organizational issues were noted” instead of identifying failures or actors).

3. Cultural Influences

The use of euphemisms in both cultures is shaped by deeper societal norms:

- In Anglo cultures, where individualism and free expression are valued, euphemisms serve as tools to reframe narratives while avoiding offense.

- In Uzbek culture, where collectivism, modesty, and respect for authority dominate, euphemisms often function as a form of linguistic politeness and political safety.

4. Lexical Strategies

English euphemisms frequently employ:

- Technical jargon (enhanced interrogation)
- Bureaucratic language (revenue enhancement)
- Politically correct terms (differently abled)

Uzbek euphemisms rely more on:

- Vague institutional terminology (muammolar yuzaga keldi)
- Ideologically coded language (yoshlar ongini yuksaltirish)

5. Media Freedom and Censorship

Media freedom plays a critical role in euphemism use:

- In English-speaking countries, where press freedom is relatively strong, euphemisms are often challenged by independent journalism and public discourse.

- In Uzbekistan, where media is more regulated, euphemisms are seldom questioned, making them a more dominant mode of public communication.

6. Audience Expectation and Interpretation

English audiences are increasingly aware of euphemistic manipulation and often critique it in political commentary and satire. In contrast, Uzbek audiences may accept euphemisms as part of official discourse, interpreting them through cultural norms of modesty, respect, and hierarchy.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of political euphemisms in English and Uzbek media reveals both universal pragmatic functions and culturally specific strategies of linguistic manipulation. Euphemisms serve as powerful rhetorical tools that allow politicians, journalists, and institutions to frame sensitive issues in more palatable terms, protect reputations, and influence public perception. In English media, euphemisms often reflect a strategic effort to maintain public approval, reduce liability, and align with political correctness. These expressions are typically more formalized, with clear lexical substitutions designed to rebrand controversial actions in less emotionally charged terms. In contrast, Uzbek media euphemisms are deeply rooted in cultural norms that prioritize indirectness, deference to authority, and social cohesion. Rather than openly addressing failure or controversy, public discourse tends to veil it in abstract or collective language, often avoiding direct attribution of blame. Euphemisms in Uzbekistan also reflect a communicative culture where respect and restraint are valued over confrontation and transparency. Despite these differences, both media environments use euphemisms to manage public sentiment, protect institutional power, and guide ideological interpretation. As media landscapes evolve, particularly in Uzbekistan where reforms are gradually encouraging more openness, the use of euphemistic language may shift — potentially becoming more transparent or diversified.

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