# A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF EUPHEMISTIC EXPRESSIONS IN WAR AND CONFLICT RHETORIC

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**Abstract:** *This article explores the pragmatic functions of euphemistic expressions in modern war and conflict rhetoric. Euphemisms are frequently used by political and military leaders to mitigate the brutality of armed conflict, manipulate public perception, and maintain ideological control. Through qualitative analysis of speeches, press briefings, and official statements related to recent military interventions, this study identifies the communicative strategies through which euphemistic language reframes violence, masks responsibility, and legitimises controversial actions. The findings reveal that euphemisms in war discourse serve not only a face-saving role but perform crucial pragmatic acts such as persuasion, justification, mitigation, and manipulation.*

**Keywords:** *euphemism, war rhetoric, conflict discourse, pragmatics, ideological manipulation, mitigation*

## INTRODUCTION

War and conflict have long been accompanied by complex rhetorical strategies through which political leaders, military officials, and media representatives attempt to shape public understanding of violence. Language is not a neutral vehicle of description in such contexts; rather, it functions as a powerful tool of persuasion, justification, and ideological control. One of the most pervasive linguistic devices used in war rhetoric is euphemism — a form of indirect expression that replaces harsh, disturbing, or taboo terms with more acceptable and less emotionally charged alternatives. Traditionally viewed as a means of politeness or decorum, euphemisms in war discourse perform crucial pragmatic functions which extend far beyond politeness. They help speakers manage public perception, conceal the true nature of military actions, and legitimise policies that might otherwise be morally objectionable. This article provides a pragmatic analysis of euphemistic expressions used in the rhetoric of war and conflict, focusing on how these linguistic tools operate to mitigate responsibility, justify aggression, and influence the collective interpretation of violence.

From a pragmatic perspective, euphemisms in war rhetoric serve specific communicative intentions or illocutionary acts. While on the surface they soften expression, their deeper purpose is to perform acts such as reassuring the public, manipulating judgement, mitigating blame, and maintaining political authority. Rather than saying "we killed civilians," officials often use "collateral damage" — a euphemism that not only dampens emotional reactions but also functions pragmatically to distance the speaker from responsibility, portray civilian deaths as accidental, and reduce potential outrage.

Lexical euphemism is the most common strategy employed in conflict rhetoric. Terms like "neutralize" for "kill", "targets" for "people", and "peacekeeping mission" for "armed intervention" manipulate the audience's perception of reality. Such substitutions reduce

negative emotional response by framing violent acts in sterile or procedural terminology. Pragmatically this allows the speaker to maintain a positive public image while continuing to justify aggression.

Metaphors provide powerful euphemistic frames for war. Referring to bombing campaigns as "clean operations" or "surgical strikes" implies precision and necessity rather than destruction. Similarly, describing warfare as a "campaign", "operation", or "mission" suggests organisation and purpose, turning destruction into an administrative task. The pragmatic function here is to reframe violence as disciplined and morally acceptable, aligning it with heroic or sanitized mental models.The transformation of verbs into nouns ("displacement" rather than "we displaced people") and the use of passive voice ("mistakes were made") remove explicit agency from acts of violence. Pragmatically, this obfuscation shields decision-makers from direct responsibility. Such euphemisms suggest that outcomes are unfortunate side effects of broader events rather than deliberate results of military policy, thereby lessening accountability and public criticism.

Military bureaucracy frequently employs technical euphemisms such as "kinetic military action", "enhanced interrogation techniques", and "collateral liquidation". These terms depersonalise brutality behind layers of complexity. Their pragmatic aim is to create emotional distance and make violent acts appear as routine, rational procedures. This rhetorical strategy disguises moral dilemmas by framing war as a matter of technical necessity, not ethical choice.Finally, euphemisms cultivate ambiguity that favours official ideology. By avoiding direct mention of "war" and using alternatives like "conflict," "engagement," or "crisis," political leaders subtly downplay the severity of events. This ambiguity leaves room for interpretation, enabling governments to maintain control of the narrative while avoiding triggering international or domestic opposition.One of the most significant pragmatic outcomes of euphemistic war rhetoric is the fostering of public consent. When politicians use expressions such as "protecting national interests" or *"spreading democracy"

One of the most significant pragmatic outcomes of euphemistic war rhetoric is the fostering of public consent. When politicians use expressions such as "protecting national interests" or "spreading democracy", they frame military interventions as noble and necessary, regardless of their underlying motives or consequences. This type of euphemism shifts the focus from violence to virtue, appealing to patriotism and shared values. Pragmatically, such framing minimizes public resistance and secures support for military actions that might otherwise face moral objection. By cloaking aggression in positive ideological narratives, euphemisms help justify war as an act of responsibility or moral duty.Euphemisms in war rhetoric also serve important psychological functions for both speakers and audiences. For the speaker (often a political or military figure), euphemisms provide cognitive distance from morally troubling realities. For the audience, they reduce emotional discomfort and cognitive dissonance. Hearing "collateral damage" instead of "civilian deaths" allows listeners to remain supportive without fully confronting the human cost of war. Pragmatically, this helps maintain public morale and shields the government from emotional backlash. In times of prolonged conflict, euphemisms become a coping mechanism for the broader society.

Mass media plays a central role in diffusing euphemistic language into public consciousness. News outlets often adopt government-supplied terminology, such as "precision

strike", "target neutralization", or "humanitarian intervention", without critically interrogating their meaning. This repetition of euphemistic frames reinforces the ideological perspective of the state, limiting space for alternative or oppositional interpretations. Pragmatically, this collaboration between political institutions and media contributes to the normalization of conflict discourse and the desensitization of the public to violence.The use and acceptance of euphemistic expressions in war rhetoric can vary across cultures and political systems. In liberal democracies, where public opinion strongly influences government policy, euphemisms are often subtler and embedded in appeals to values such as freedom, security, or peace. In contrast, authoritarian regimes may use more forceful euphemisms to reinforce propaganda and suppress dissent. Despite these differences, the pragmatic function of euphemisms — to mitigate, obscure, and justify — remains consistent across political and cultural boundaries.

Conclusion

In conclusion, euphemistic expressions in war and conflict rhetoric are not merely stylistic or polite alternatives but are deeply pragmatic tools employed to manage public perception, maintain authority, and legitimise controversial actions. The use of euphemisms allows speakers—particularly political and military leaders—to obscure the harsh realities of war, reduce emotional reactions, and frame aggression as necessary or justified. Through lexical substitutions and strategic ambiguity, euphemistic language enables the performance of pragmatic acts such as persuasion, justification, mitigation, and manipulation. This study highlights how euphemisms function not only to save face but also to shape ideological narratives and normalize violence within public discourse. Future research could further investigate cross-cultural differences in war euphemisms and examine how audiences respond to such rhetoric in varying sociopolitical contexts.

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