

The euphemism in political speeches:

An analysis of the use of the word *war* and the meaning behind it

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Political debate through the years has been impossible without utilizing a set of euphemisms that are associated with political correctness. Taking this into consideration, the question of how these euphemisms in war-related speeches are used and whether they had been undergoing changes through time seems to delineate an interesting topic in the study of euphemisms.

In this project we analyze different presidential speeches given by presidents of the United States of America (George Washington's speech in 1796 about the European Wars and the relationships with the Native Americans, Woodrow Wilson's speech in 1914 during WWI, Franklin Roosevelt's speech in 1939 during WWII, Harry Truman's speech in 1951 during the Korean war, George Bush's speech in 2003 during the Iraq war), in an attempt to answer a series of questions: How are euphemisms used in war-related speeches given by American presidents and how can they be classified? What are the emotions related to these uses? Do their uses change over time?

In particular, we investigate the following hypothesis:

- (1) Through the language used and the wording chosen in their speeches, it can be observed that political leaders tend to portray perceiving war as something to be avoided.

Results show that there indeed is a difference of occurrence of the word *war* through time, as shown in Table 1, being its highest ratio of occurrence for the speeches from 1939 and 1951. Furthermore, in its majority, we will show that presidents indeed tend to utilize various euphemisms to refer to a war-context in a less direct way. It appears that the most common collocates that come in context with the word *war* are verbs such as *prevent*, *avoid*, *keep out* and *hate*, which mark war as something to be avoided. Nominal collocates include *influence*,

terror, victory and regime, as well as the constant reference to the world, the nations and the continents.

In this study, we also investigated the use of potential synonyms of war listed in Table 2, which we found as interesting instances of avoiding the direct use of the word *war* and thought worth mentioning. In addition, we collected a series of direct euphemisms that are used as a way of embellishing such a strong word as is *war*, which show the remarkable inventiveness of the American presidents in question and how these euphemistic instances of *war* are implemented in a rather playful manner. Some examples are listed in Table 3. Regarding the emotions possibly shown in the presidential speeches we could conclude that the presidents present *war* as something negative and associated with negative emotions when referring to these conflicts.

Table 1. Scores of the average in which the word *war* appears in the selected presidential speeches for the experiment.

Year	President	Instances per 100 words	Sample size
1796	George Washington	0.42	2864 words
1914	Woodrow Wilson	0.60	737 words
1939	Franklin Roosevelt	1.13	1.235 words
1951	Harry Truman	0.97	2459 words
2003	George Bush	0.47	5951 words

Table 2. Collection of the most common synonyms found in our investigation that appear in the context of the word *war*.

Synonym	Instances	Synonym	Instances
Armed	9	Combat	2
Attack	8	Assault	1
Battle	7	Distress	1
Crisis	7	Disaster	1
Conflict	5	Issue/s	1
Fighting	4	Struggle	1

Table 3. Examples of the euphemisms found in the selected presidential speeches to embellish the word *war*.

Euphemism	Classification
<i>Time of peculiar trial; Circumstances of a very unwelcome nature; The women and the children who are living and dying; Days that are to try men's souls; Great moment to the security of a Nation; Blackout of peace; Difficult and bitter task; Efforts to restore peace; Threat to the peace</i>	Metaphorical circumlocution
<i>Troubled weeks; Interruption of their trade; Unfortunate events; Momentous struggle; Circumstances of conflict</i>	Euphemistic understatement/ circumlocution
<i>Marching armies; Critical matter; Military campaign; Global terror</i>	One-for-one substitution

References: • Allan, Keith & Kate Burridge. 1991. *Euphemism and dysphemism: Language used as shield and weapon*. New York: Oxford University Press.
 • Crespo-Fernández, Eliecer. 2014. *Euphemism and political discourse in the British regional press*. *Brno Studies in English*. 40. 5-26.
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