

“I am not pro-abortion; I am pro-choice”: How euphemisms shape political discussions of abortion.

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The abortion debate deals with the ethics of deliberately ending a pregnancy before childbirth. Abortion is a controversial topic in the United States: in 2019, 61% of Americans believed abortion should be legal in all or most cases, while 38% believed it should be illegal in all or most cases (Public Opinion on Abortion 2019). The language that is used to talk about abortion influences how the topic is perceived by the public (Pizarro Pedraza 2015). Given the polarizing and taboo nature of the subject, we were curious about how euphemisms and dysphemisms (Allan & Burrige 1991) are used to talk about abortion in American English, especially in the political sphere. How do members of different ideological groups express their opinions about abortion? We hypothesize that pro-life and pro-choice speakers use different clusters of euphemistic terms.

We used the HBKU Corpus of Political Speeches (Ahrens 2015) and Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al. 2014) to examine the usage of 6 relevant terms: *abortion*, *pro-life*, *pro-choice*, *late-term abortion*, *unborn child*, and *reproductive rights*. For each instance we then categorized its source as pro-life, pro-choice, or other/neutral/unclear.

Table 1: Number of occurrences of the terms investigated in this study, sorted by usage.

Term	Number of occurrences	Pro-life usages	Pro-choice usages	Unclear/neutral usages
Pro-life (HKBU)	8	4	0	4
Unborn child (HKBU)	49	44	1	4
Abortion (HKBU)	154	96	23	35
Pro-choice (HKBU)	2	0	2	0
Reproductive rights (Sketch Engine)	79	13	18	48
Late-term abortion (Sketch Engine)	540 total (analysed sample of 100)	41	50	9

For all of our terms, even the ones generally associated with pro-choice beliefs (*pro-choice* and *reproductive rights*), we found very few utterances from pro-choice speakers, as Table 1 shows. This could indicate that pro-life speakers talk about abortion more often, or that our corpus had a greater number of speeches from pro-life supporters. Euphemisms mostly used by pro-life supporters are *pro-life* as well as *unborn child/children*. Pro-choice supporters use the terms *pro-choice* and *reproductive rights* more often. We can therefore generally confirm our hypothesis, stating that pro-choice and pro-life supporters use different kinds of euphemisms.

Exceptions to this generalization are the term *late term pregnancy*, which is used by both groups, as well as the term *abortion*, which is used by neutral and pro-choice speakers less frequently than by pro-life supporters, but is still used by all groups considered here in its neutral usage. We also noted that terms like *late term abortion*, *pro-life*, and *reproductive rights* are sometimes used as dysphemisms by members of the opposing group. *Abortion* is yet again an exception here, which is mostly used in its neutral usage, but is anecdotically used as eu-/dysphemism by pro-life supporters only.

We conclude from our findings that, although there are exceptions and borderline cases, pro-life and pro-choice supporters use a specific set of terms that distinguishes them from the group whose views they are up against. If terminology common for the opposing group is used, speakers tend to use it to distance themselves from the other group, for instance, by using quotation marks and implying an illegitimacy of the uttered term. Eu-/dysphemisms are therefore in this case used to establish a connection with the group that one identifies with, while marking disapproval for the opposing group through language use at the same time.

It would be interesting to analyze in what way language concerning the abortion conflict may differ in other English-speaking countries. Further research could also examine whether a similar pattern exists in discussion of other taboo topics (e.g. conflicts concerning euthanasia, gun control or meat consumption).

References • Ahrens, Kathleen. 2015. *Corpus of political speeches*. Hong Kong Baptist University Library, <http://digital.lib.hkbu.edu.hk/corpus/>. (25 January, 2021). • Allan, Keith & Kate Burridge. 1991. *Euphemism & Language used as Dysphemism*. Oxford: University Press. • Kilgarriff, Adam, Vít Baisa, Jan Bušta, Miloš Jakubiček, Vojtěch Kovář, Jan Michelfeit, Pavel Rychlý & Vít Suchomel. 2014. The Sketch Engine: ten years on. *Lexicography* 1. 7-36, <https://www.sketchengine.eu/>. (30 January, 2021). • Pizarro Pedraza, Andrea. 2015. Who said 'abortion'? Semantic variation and ideology in Spanish newspapers' online discussions. *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 35(1). 53-75. • *Public Opinion on Abortion*. 2019. https://www.pewforum.org/fact-sheet/public-opinion-on-abortion/?te=1&nl=david-leonhardt&emc=edit_ty_20191113%3Fcampaign_id&instance_id=13819&segment_id=18745&user_id=438ead91381c92857f24ed689c953d59@i_id=2324318920191113. (29 January, 2021).