

Unit 8

Circumlocution, Euphemism, Clichés

A circumlocution is a roundabout expression used when dealing about a disagreeable idea. A euphemism is a device, usually consisting of a single word, giving a more attractive appearance to an objectionable idea. The most obvious examples of circumlocution and euphemism are expressions used to soften the idea of death (*pass away* , *enter info rest* , *expire*, *be deceased* --*kick the bucket*, *turn in one's checks* , *give up the ghost*); toilet (*rest room* , *powder room*); unpleasant truths relating to diseases (mental *illness* , *rest home* , *malignancy* , *lung affliction*); unpleasant facts of life (*expectorate* for spit, *plant food* for manure, *country home* for poor house, *intemperance* for drunkenness, *infidelity* for adultery, *visually handicapped* for blind).

Euphemisms are also commonly used in referring to occupations either to conceal a definite unpleasantness or to improve social status. Thus, *foremen* , *bookkeepers* , *office-girls* , *rat-catchers* , *undertakers* , *pawnbrokers* , *shoemakers* , *press-agents* , *hired girls* , or *janitors* have become respectively, *supervisory personnel* , *accountants* , *secretaries* (receptionists) , *exterminators* , morticians (*funeral directors*), *proprietors of loan offices* , *shoe-rebuilders* , *public relations counselors* , *domestics* , and custodians . Examples of euphemisms used to upgrade social status are: *director of pupil personnel* (head truant officer), *sales /customers' representatives /sales engineers* (salesman).

The following is a list of phrases that teachers in a New York City junior high school use to convey their complaints about their pupils to the parents without causing offense.

Awkward and clumsy	Appears to have difficulty with motor control and muscular coordination
Does all right if pushed	Accomplishes tasks when interest is frequently stimulated
Too free with fists	Resorts to physical means of winning his points or attracting attention
Could stand more baths, is dirty, has bad odor	Needs guidance in development of good habits of hygiene
Lies	Shows difficulty in distinguishing between imaginary and factual material
Steals	Needs help in learning to respect the property rights of others
Cheats	Needs help in learning to adhere to rules and standards of fair play
Insolent	Needs guidance in learning to express himself respectfully
Lazy	Needs ample supervision in order to work well
Rude	Needs to develop a respectful attitude toward others
Selfish	Needs help in learning to enjoy sharing with others
Coarse	Needs assistance in developing social refinement
Noisy	Needs to develop quieter habits of communication

Circumlocutions and euphemisms are useful to help ease social relationships where tact and courtesy are required instead of bluntness. On

the other hand, the sacrifice of directness is a considerable price to pay for delicacy. Roundabout expressions should be used only when there is a clear practical reason for using them instead of their more direct equivalents.

The word **cliché** is French, meaning stereotype--a metal plate cast from a page of type--a term used in printing. The stereotype enables the printer to make more copies without having to reset **all** the type each time. In **English** usage cliché means a ready-cast or stereotyped expression--a pre-fabricated phrase--which saves a writer or speaker the trouble of trying to find a new way of saying something.

Insofar as it economizes on time and effort, the cliché is undoubtedly efficient. **gut** good writing must be **also** effective, which means it must impress readers with the sincerity of the writer. it must be fresh, that is, it must look like it is written for a particular occasion. One who uses clichés is writing mechanically. The willful or ignorant use of trite language seems to imply that the writer is **intellectually** as well as **verbally** imitative. However, it does not mean that good writers never use clichés; if they use them at **all**, they use them **with** the utmost caution. In informal conversation especially, clichés are almost indispensable.

How can we tell when an expression becomes cliché? A practical test is: if you can **accurately** anticipate what a speaker is going to say next, he is obviously using clichés. For example, at a funeral you may hear "We are gathered here today to mourn (the untimely death) of our beloved daughter. Words are inadequate (to express the grief that is in our hearts)." The words in parentheses are what you expect the speaker to be saying and thus are clichés.

Many familiar clichés are figures of speech. **If** the reader has become so accustomed to a figure of speech to the point that it no longer stimulates his imagination, then it is no different from a nonfigurative expression. Many such images which are clever and appropriate at first

have become almost lifeless **like** the following metaphors and similes:
• *common as dirt, old as hills, sell like hot cakes, sleep like a log; a bolt from the blue, variety is the spice of life, point the finger of suspicion....*

One variety of clichés comes from the desire to suggest a resemblance between some aspect of man's behavior and that of animals. The following excerpt comes from a leaflet issued periodically by the Columbia University Press and we can see that the **missing element** may be automatically supplied in a cliché.

“Man,” says *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, “is distinguished from other animals by his brain and his hands.” But there the difference would seem to end because he is chicken-livered, lion-hearted, pigeon-toed. He is treacherous as a snake, sly as a fox, busy as a slippery as an industrious as an ant, blind as a bat, faithful as a dog, gentle as a lamb. He has clammy hands, the ferocity of the tiger, the manners of a pig, the purpose of a jellyfish. He gets drunk as an owl. He roars like a he coos like a dove. He is still as a mouse; he hops around like a sparrow. He works like a horse. He is led like a sheep. He can fly like a bird, run like a deer, drink like a swim like a duck. He is nervous as a cat. He sticks his head in the sand like an He acts like a dog in the manger. He is coltish and kittenish, and stubborn as a He plays possum. He gets hungry as a bear, and wolfs his food. He has the memory of an elephant. He is easily cowed. He gets thirsty as a camel. He is as strong as an He has a catlike walk, and a mousy manner. He parrots everything he hears. He acts like a puppy, and is as playful as a kitten. He struts like a rooster, and as vain as a peacock. He is as happy as a and as sad as an owl. He has a whale of an appetite. He has a beak for a nose, and

arms like an ape. He has the eyes of a and the neck of a bull. He is as slow as a tortoise. He chatters like a magpie. He has raven hair and the shoulders of a buffalo. He's as dumb as an ox--he is even as big as an ox. He's a worm. His is cooked. He's crazy as a bedbug (or fox or coot). He's a rat. He's a louse. Of course, he is also as cool as cucumber, fresh as a red as a beet, etc.--But The Columbia Encyclopedia doesn't suggest that he differs in any way from vegetables and other flora, so we won't go into that.

Another category of cliches insists upon associating a particular descriptive adjective with a given noun: whirlwind courtship , stony *silence* , crushing defeat , rocketing costs . Other common types of cliches are verb and noun phrases. Verb phrases include *to live to a ripe old age* , *to let bygones be bygones* , *to upset the applecart* , to *withstand the test of time*. Noun phrases that have been worn out include ace *up his sleeve* , *the patter of rain* , a diamond *in the rough*, *the fly in the ointment*.

Cliches should be avoided most in descriptive and narrative writings since their **success** depend on the freshness and exactness with which the writer communicates his expressions to the reader. A writer who uses words that someone else has used before in his work does not present any new experience. We cannot see things from any new angle or receive a fresh interpretation of their meaning. A writer who depends upon cliches is not being creative.

Many cliches are derived from books that have great influence on *the* common speech. *To kill the fatted calf* , *the straw that breaks the camel's back* , all come from the Bible even though the original Biblical connotations may have been forgotten. It is unfortunate that many of the finest things that have been said in the world like some of the most moving

poems and political documents have become hackneyed through constant use.

Exercise 1 Euphemism and Circumlocution

Point out the euphemism or circumlocution in each of the following pairs of words.

grease job/lubrication service

foundation garment/corset

field underwriter/insurance salesman

false teeth/denture

house trailer/mobile home

automatic coin machine/juke box

slum clearance/urban renewal

principal/headmaster

toothpaste/dentifrice

table service man/bus boy

dishwasher/utensil maintenance man

sub foreman/group leader

telephone answerer/night hostess (in a girls' dormitory)

route salesman/milkman

service salesman/gas station attendant

installment plan/deferred payment

laying off/termination of employment

artificial/simulated (material)

door-to-door canvasser/brush salesman

clerk/sales person

Exercise 2

Slang often has euphemistic intent (*bump off* for *kill* , *whopper* for *lie*). How many of the following terms are euphemistic slang? How many are euphemisms without being slang?

nut house

madhouse

booby hatch

insane asylum

private sanitarium

mental hospital

institution for the treatment of nervous diseases

loony bin

lunatic asylum

retreat

Exercise 3

a. *Why* is the word *institute* used so often to designate establishments devoted neither to education nor to research, as *in American Iron and Steel Institute* ?

b. Why do some large firms, including department stores, refer to their employees as *associates* ?

c. Make a list of modern euphemistic synonyms for the old-fashioned *saloon* .

d. "And now, a *brief message* from our sponsor." Why *brief message*, rather than advertisement or commercial?

e. Why is the word **family** frequently used in the advertisements of great corporations, when referring to their employees or to the subsidiary companies?

Exercise 4 Cliches

Fill in the blanks:

1. First and _____, in my search I will leave no stone _____.
It will be a labor of _____
2. By prompt action she was f r o m t h e j a w s of _____;
otherwise she would have gone to a watery _____.
3. last but not _____, to make a long story _____, he is caught between the _____ and the deep blue sea. Such is _____.
4. He did the land office _____ the first month he was open, but the wear and _____ on his health was too great. So he took a vacation in Florida, saying that the change would either _____ or cure him. Underneath, though, one could detect that he was whistling in the _____
5. As sure as _____ and taxes.
Packed in tight as _____.
Sharp as _____
Quick as _____
Hard as _____
silent as _____.
stick out as _____
Dull as _____
Innocent _____ as _____.
Mad as _____