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Metonymic motivation in English euphemisms. A cognitive-linguistic perspective

Keywords: taboo, euphemism, circumlocution, conceptual metonymy

The aim of the presentation is to analyse the use of conceptual metonymy as a motivation for the meaning of English euphemisms. Euphemisms belong to those special instances of language use that avoid the literal and direct naming of certain things or experiences because of the taboo associated with them in a given society. The spheres of culture that tend to employ euphemisms in their language usually include profanity, sexuality, excretion, drinking alcohol and taking drugs, crime, murder and death, military action and religion.

The typical linguistic mechanisms that serve as circumlocutions of the explicit taboo expression involve understatements (“sleeping” for “dying”), generalisations (“doing it” for “having sex”), shortening an expression (“what the...” for “what the fuck”), rhyming (“what the truck” for “what the fuck”), acronymisation (“peeing” for “pissing”), mispronunciation (“what the fudge” for “what the fuck”), using personal names (“john” for “a toilet”), metaphor (“buns” for “buttocks”) and metonymy (“drinking” for “consuming alcohol”).

Especially the last mechanism in the above list, perceived as “conceptual metonymy”, which occurs at the level of thought, provides a wide range of possibilities to avoid the use of a taboo word in English. The idea behind metonymy in cognitive semantics is using one concept for another that is related to it. The identified metonymic mappings to be presented comprise, among others: ONE ACTION FOR ANOTHER ACTION PERFORMED IN THE SAME PLACE (“powdering the nose” for “excreting”; “sleeping together” for “having sex”), GENERAL FOR SPECIFIC (“drinking” for “drinking alcohol”; “presence” for “military occupation”), EFFECT FOR CAUSE (“neutralising” for “killing the enemy”; “tired and emotional” for “drunk”), A USER FOR THE OBJECT USED (“an adult drink” for “an alcoholic beverage”; “gentlemen's club” for “a go-go bar”), A SALIENT PROPERTY FOR THE ENTITY (“the evil one” for “Satan”; “a blue” for “a policeman”), PART FOR WHOLE (“a badge” for “a policeman”; “a button” for “a policeman”), and A FUNCTION/ROLE FOR THE ENTITY (“feminine protection” for “a tampon”; “Lord” for “God”).

References

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4. Rawson, Hugh. 1981. *A Dictionary of Euphemisms and Other Doubletalk*. New York: Crown Publishers.