Euphemisms vs. Dysphemisms, or How we Construct Good and Bad Language

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> Context • Assuming upon the suggestion of dictionary makers and language theorists that some words are more pleasant than others and that it affects the way we should communicate, we put the cart before the horse and make a big categorial mistake. **> Problem** • Negative and positive emotional reactions to words are not something that can be deduced from words themselves and predicted before the communicative interaction. Instead, it is when, where and who utters these words that makes them sound good or bad for us, as observers. **> Method** • Based on the methods of experiential linguistic analysis of observational data I investigate philosophical roots and empirical manifestations of good and bad language in communicative interactions. **> Results** • I formulate and prove the hypothesis that euphemisms and dysphemisms are experiential factors of our dynamic situational construction of others. Our construal of some words as good or bad depends upon the experience we have of another person with whom we interact *in situ*. **> Implications** • Findings of my research illuminate the inherently experiential nature of language, which might lead sociologists and linguists to reconsider the way they approach the power of good and bad words. Moreover, it is argued to be neither possible nor necessary for scholars to make lists of euphemisms or dysphemisms, at least for non-written communication. **> Constructivist content** • I rely upon the concepts of radical constructivism such as experience construction, experiential field, construction of others. **> Key words** • **X-phemism, relativity of experience, relatability of experience, experiencer, communicative interaction, experiential analysis, linguistic meaning.**

Introduction

« 1 » Today it has become common to distinguish between good and bad language in terms of euphemisms and dysphemisms. The former are "indirect,"[1] "polite"[2] words and expressions used to avoid "shocking or upsetting someone"[3] and saying "unpleasant or offensive words"[4] to make the thing spoken of seem more acceptable and pleasant. The latter are words "more offensive and derogatory than they need to be."[5] Dysphemistic expressions and behaviors (swearing, name-calling, curses, derogatory comments, etc.) are impolite, "dispreferred" and tabooed, while their respective alternatives (or opposites) are euphemistic sweet-talking and face-saving ways of communication (Allan & Burridge 2006: 29–33). In line with Keith Allan, I will use the umbrella term X-phemism to refer to either a euphemism or a dysphemism, or both (Allan 2009).

« 2 » In order to show the flaws of this generally accepted view of good and bad language, I will analyze the history of how euphemisms and dysphemisms were conceptualized at different developmental stages of linguistic thought.

« 3 » *Nomenclaturism* is the view of language as God-given nomenclature originally created in the Garden of Eden by the holy name-maker who called things by their correct names, which reflected their "true essences" (Harris 1996: 8). This thesis, widely held in the eighteenth century and earlier, was reiterated by Richard Trench (1851), a prominent Anglican divine who steered the campaign towards the publication of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Language was thus assumed to be a divine gift not to be abused. Already in Plato's dialogue *Cratylus*, we find a similar belief in the inherent correctness of language that should not be corrupted by common usage in the course of time:

> "[E]verything has a right name of its own, which comes by nature, and that a name is not whatever people call a thing by agreement, […] but there is a kind of inherent correctness in names" (Plato 1926: 383, A/B).

« 4 » An original understanding of the term "euphemism" derived from Greek in the seventeenth century was purely nomenclaturist and implied the existence of good names as natural and bad names as unnatural, i.e., unwelcomed by the divine name-maker. Euphemism is "a favorable word in place of an inauspicious one, superstitious avoidance of words of ill-omen during religious ceremonies."[6] The etymology of the word *phēmē* speaks for itself in this respect. The Proto-Indo-European root **bha-* "to speak, tell, say," from which the word derives, is traced in such words as "ban," "banish," "bandit," "banal" related to the meaning of religiously imposed taboos or prescriptions[7] (cf. the archaic meaning of "ban" is "to

1| *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries*, https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/euphemism?q=euphemism

2| *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, https://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/euphemism

3| Ibid.

4| *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/euphemism

5| *Macmillan Dictionary*, https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/dysphemism

6| *Online Etymology Dictionary*, https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=euphemism

7| *Merriam-Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ban

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curse someone"). Thus, *phēmē* does not refer to an ordinary utterance, but implies some divine controller behind this act of uttering. A conclusion may be drawn that, historically, a "eu*phem*ism" (literally "a good utterance") is an antithesis of blas*phemy* ("utterance against God").

« 5 » *Representationism* feeds upon the philosophy of rationalism and embraces a variety of analytical approaches where language is conceptualized within the mind-matter dichotomy as a map or picture of either our knowledge or "the outer world." Words, thought and nature are separate from one another.[8] Language is considered a not necessarily "correct" representation of nature. Representationists maintain that there is something between a name and a thing, and this something is a concept, semantic content that conventionally substitutes a "real" thing and is arbitrarily substituted by the name. It follows that an analysis of language may reveal two types of mismatch, or misrepresentation – between the concept and "reality" or the concept and its expression (Harris 1996: 4). Euphemisms, thus, suit the purpose of putting these mismatches right and begin to be understood as rhetorical terms substituting "less distasteful words than those meant."[9]

« 6 » Representationism is incompatible with nomenclaturism and this is why it should not come as a surprise that the practice of euphemizing comes to be viewed as a not necessarily good, God-abiding behavior. Firstly, as George Berkley claimed, defending Christianity against free thinkers (such as Bernard Mandeville) in *Alciphron or the Minute Philosopher,* substitute words mask and justify human vices:

> "[P]hilosophers, who, considering that most men are influenced by names rather than things, have introduced a certain polite way of speaking, which lessens much of the abhorrence and prejudice against vice." (Berkley 1732: 62)

« 7 » Secondly, the dissatisfaction with euphemistic representation of "reality" gave rise to the opposite type of linguistic substitution known as dysphemism (the term first attested in 1873 and rediscovered in 1927):

> "Dysphemism is unpitying, brutal, mocking. It is also a reaction against pedantry, rigidity and pretentiousness, but also against nobility and dignity in language." (Carnoy 1927: 351)

« 8 » *Functionalism* may refer to different types of contemporary approaches to communication (such as speech-act theory, pragmaticism, sociolinguistics) whose assumption is that the name represents the concept or/and the thing the way this concept or/and this thing function in our life. With "good" and "bad" language, functionalism attempts to "sit on the fence" between both nomenclaturism and representationism, namely by:

- setting prescriptions for safe language use (e.g., dictionary markers "taboo," "disapproving," "informal," "offensive," "polite," etc.);
- introducing nomenclatures of politically correct language as a way to respect and tolerate differences between people;[10]
- describing situations where people do resort to euphemisms or swear words for psychological, social and other reasons (Jay 1992; Davis 1998).

What is wrong with the theory of euphemisms and dysphemisms?

« 9 » In what follows, I will give a number of logical and methodical reasons to explain what is wrong with an understanding of "good" and "bad" language across these three conceptual realms.

« 10 » Firstly, the definition of the terms traps us in a circular logic. Assuming that a euphemism substitutes an offensive word and a dysphemism is an offensive word instead of a less offensive one, we can infer that a euphemism substitutes a dysphemism that substitutes a/the euphemism. Secondly, such an understanding of word choice seems to be what Paul Watzlawik (1977: 19) called a "be-spontaneous paradox." Substitution is an operation on the choice (to be) made for the purpose of correcting or editing this choice. When it comes to language, editing is quite natural in handling written texts because these are not meant to be spontaneous. Yet, with spoken communication, especially in casual, everyday-life situations, editing does not seem to work because it deprives spoken interactions of their intrinsic properties such as spontaneity, immediacy and time pressure. Thirdly, an important methodological issue follows. Substitution or using a word "instead of something else" seems to be a matter of theoretical speculation that has little or nothing to do with empirical phenomena. That someone substitutes a thing for another thing, or chooses one thing instead of another, can be empirically observed and verified only if these two things can be compared to each other independently like, for example, two cards in the hands of a player during a card game. One can never prove that I am choosing a word *instead of* another one and thereby using a euphemism or dysphemism. I may refer to my wife as a housemaker not because I want to spare her or all women's feelings, but because to me she is somebody who makes my home. My friend may refer to his wife as a housewife because it is the way he feels it – his spouse is the woman he is married to who is always there for him in his house. Or he may not be aware of any other ways of referring to what his wife does. Therefore, X-phemisms seem to have no empirical base and are linguists' abstractions that can work only in the domain of other abstractions, outside of empirical interactions, in other words, in texts and written communication. Yet, there are no reservations made by linguists about X-phemisms making sense only in written language. Conversely, conclusions made from analyzing texts are extrapolated to empirical phenomena (communicative behaviors), and X-phemisms are understood to be a legitimate kind of polite language use in all its physical manifestations. Hence, where linguists make a categorial mistake is in substituting explanatory abstraction for empirical observation (Kastrup 2018).

« 11 » All of the mentioned problems of X-phemisms as theoretical constructs seem to result from one main fallacy. Defining some terms as more offensive than others,

8| Cf. the sign-denotatum-referent triangle by Charles Ogden and Ivor Richards (1923) and its critique by Alexander Kravchenko (2013: 140ff).

9| *Online Etymology Dictionary*, https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=euphemism

10| Cf. "100 Politically Correct Words and Phrases," https://bnp.org.uk/politically-correct-words/

linguists admit that language is grounded in emotions and human experience. Yet, the same linguists, along with lexicographers, forget about emotions and experience, even theoretically, when they insist that some words are good while others are bad no matter when, where and by whom they are used. We can never predict what kind of experience we may have tomorrow with, let us say, our car. Today it was good, tomorrow it may be bad. Similarly, we can never say what kind of experience our neighbor will have with our car. Therefore, it seems quite obvious that the concept of experience construction is what is lacking in the theory of X-phemisms to make it more coherent and logically consistent. In this article I will try to eradicate this epistemic gap.

Key concepts of the constructivist theory of X-phemisms

« 12 » In this part of the article, I will elaborate on and theoretically develop some concepts of radical constructivism relevant to my research. I will start with the claim that language as experience and language as material to use are two incompatible concepts.

From language users to experiencers

« 13 » Ferdinand de Saussure, the founding father of linguistic science, proclaimed that language is "an instrument created by a collectivity and provided for its use" (Saussure 1959: 11). His ideas were developed by another influential philosopher of language, Ludwig Wittgenstein, who established that "the use of a word in the language is its meaning" (Wittgenstein 1974: 60) and every sign by itself is dead – the use is its life (Wittgenstein 1958: §432). Wittgenstein went further and compared the act of language use with a move in a chess game whose conventional rules are known and shared by all the players, otherwise the game would make no sense. Based on this argument, Wittgenstein finds it impossible to change the linguistic conventions by an act of will and say without painful mental gymnastics "It's cold here" meaning "It's warm here" (ibid.: §510).

« 14 » The view of language as some material to use and humans as language users seems to meet no objections in today's language studies and teaching practices. The usage-based thesis says that "language structure emerges from language use" (Tomasello 2003: 5). There are a number of logical implications following from this way of terming things:

A As long as we use it, language appears to be something we may choose or may not, according to our needs (e.g., when our car is out of order, we can use a bus to get to work);
B Language and its meanings are something we take from others;
C Any use of language can be judged as correct or incorrect, good or bad as long as in the minds of speakers exist (or are invented) rules of the game;
D We cannot change the conventions in a linguistic game.

« 15 » Implication A seems implausible as we humans can hardly imagine situations when we choose a non-linguistic (non-semantic) "tool" to communicate and construct anything. Even if you are quietly and solely walking around a shopping mall, all things you are doing make sense to you because you are acting upon and in language as your semantic memory (Stephen Cowley 2011 refers to this as "taking a language stance"). All you see around you is what you know (remember) by name as a constraint for your perceptual actions (ibid.), i.e., the linguistic relation you once established between a perceptual object and yourself in an act of reflection. "That which does not appear in our reflections does not exist" (Maturana 2006: 96).

« 16 » It is interesting to note in this respect how people with Alzheimer's disease do not only lose the ability to "use" language as a tool, they gradually lose themselves, as Lisa Genova described in her 2007 novel *Still Alice*. It is now recognized that many, if not most of those afflicted with progressive aphasia, suffer from not only impairment of memory, but loss of executive functions, as well (Mesulam 1982).

« 17 » Some would say that language serves as a tool of communication as long as we choose between linguistic and *non*-linguistic (*extra*-linguistic) ways of sending our message. Alternatives may include physical bodily behaviors like engaging in a fight, sighing, frowning, etc. This contrast of communicative actions, however reasonable it may seem at a glance, implies an understanding of language as a "*non*-bodied," or "*extra*-bodied" phenomenon. This, in turn, contradicts the common-sensical view that to become language in any meaning of this word it needs to be produced in and by our body.

« 18 » Statement B shows where the whole usage-based thesis is wrong. Particularly, saying that "language structure emerges from language use" is a logical fallacy because one and the same thing cannot emerge if it is already in use somewhere. A baby cannot be born if she is already being raised by her parents at home.

« 19 » Biologically, we cannot take anything (such as food, for example) from others if our organism does not "know" how to appropriate (to enter into metabolic chemical reactions with) the substance given to it based upon what is already there in its own chemical structure (such as enzymes). Psychologically, we cannot take meanings from other people if we have not built any meaning inside ourselves, in other words, if we do not understand the difference between others and ourselves. Wittgenstein and Tomasello never explain how this difference should be constructed in the first place. If they had, they would have probably reached the conclusion that this construction also comes with language, and to be ready to play a game of chess means being a competent chess player anyway.

« 20 » Claim C raises an important issue of grammaticality. Basically, spotting mistakes in another's speech and finding her language incorrect results from comparing our perceptual acting with the expectations. A mistake is when our expectations of what attentional objects should come next in the flow of speech turn out to be incompatible with the attentional objects cohered in the flow of speech. Yet, all our expectations cannot be based but on our previous experience of acting; that is why a mistake is as much an experiential factor as language where this mistake is made. If our best friend from Brazil is struggling to describe how much he enjoyed staying with us, our attention is "prepared" to focus on its objects in a specific sequence, the way our emotional disposition and our experience with the friend tell

us. How many mistakes, if any, can we spot in our friend's speech? The question seems meaningless.

« 21 » However, the claim that grammaticality comes across as an experiential factor should not serve as an excuse for mistakes, especially those made on paper. On paper, we are disengaged from the experiential context and our attentional focalizations are regulated by nothing but the text we are reading and our expectations are based only on the text(s) we have read. As a rule, we do not have any experience with the author; that is why we have more rational(istic) ground to rely on in finding all kinds of mistakes. Still, if the text is a letter (message) from our Brazilian friend, the mistakes again may turn into "a blind spot."

« 22 » The analogy between communication and a game, so favored by Wittgenstein and his followers, seems to be as flawed as premise D about the impossibility of changing the linguistic relations (aka rules of the game). The flaw lies in the misunderstanding of the complexity of dynamic systems. Game is the process of moving from order to disorder in a linear and determinate manner. Playing starts at a zero point where the balance of forces is absolutely equal and inevitably leads us to a point where this balance is more upset than it was before. Life is, conversely, order brought by chaos (Monod 1972; Prigogine & Stengers 1984) and living is fighting against the Second Law of Thermodynamics by organizing the world out of disorder (Morin 1992; Foerster 2003: 279). Communicative interaction as participatory sensemaking is thus the process of reaching balance and agreement out of imbalance and disagreement. "Confusion triggers off an immediate search for meaning or order" (Watzlawick 1977: 27) and "if we both spoke logically all the time, we would never get anywhere. We would only parrot all the old clichés" (Bateson 1972: 15). That is why misinterpretation, or better, unexpectedly different interpretations of one and the same meaning seems to be natural for communication.

« 23 » For all these logical reasons, language should not be approached as some material existing somewhere ready for use. People are not simple consumers, users of language. We do not use language, we *live* it and *in* it (in "the house of our being" in the words of Martin Heidegger 2010), we construct it as well as being constructed through it ("*sprachgebildet*," Weisgerber 1929), because without language we would not be aware of who we are (Maturana 2006). Unlike representationism, where language is analyzed within the dichotomy of the physical (the moment of speech) and mental (system of signs as part of the speaker's knowledge), the constructivist, particularly biocognitive, model of language is predicated upon the following tenets:

- "In our individual experience, we find ourselves in language, we do not see ourselves growing into it: we are already observers by being in language" (Maturana 1988: 5).
- The availability of the experiencer's conceptual structures "cannot be demonstrated before the onset of language" (Glasersfeld & Ackermann 2011: 200), because the development of the semiotic function requires that all sensorimotor knowledge be *reconstructed* on a *qualitatively* different plane, the process termed as vertical decalage (Piaget 1976: 148; Bibok et al. 2009: 234). Such a qualitative reconstruction of a child's preoperational ('prelinguistic') concepts means that they do not begin to *co-function with* the respective linguistic equivalents, but are *fitted into* the semantic mould, the new cognitive "extension of the human sensorium" (Kravchenko 2020: 122).
- There is no sense in segregating language, reality and knowledge from one another, because "things arise in language when the observer arises" (Maturana 1988: 3) and "the human brain thinks in language" (Maturana, Mpodozis & Letelier 1995).
- In language analysis, "the paramount importance of the speaker as the ultimate point of reference takes an about-face turn, yielding the 'right of birth' to the observer" (Kravchenko 2011: 359), i.e., the experiencer.

« 24 » Along these lines, language can be described as our experiential dynamics in which we experiencers live and communicate with one another. Rather than being relegated to a social level only, language seems to emerge *across* the two domains of our existence – inner-subjectivity and inter-subjectivity (Druzhinin 2020b: 72).

« 25 » When it comes to semantics, linguistic meanings are *open-ended experiential categories*. We construct meanings aka linguistic references (names, words) by recognizing similarities as well as differences between items of our experiential world. Similarities are established because we do not lose a sense of being in this world and are able to specify our experiencing position at the moment of interacting with an experiential item (i.e., we do not stop experiencing ourselves at any moment of time). In discriminating a continuous flow of experience, we find differences in this flow and split it into separate items (i.e., we keep experiencing something different at every moment of time) (Simsky, Kravchenko & Druzhinin 2021: 15ff). The interdependence of these two cognitive ways of interacting with the experiential world allows for the circularity and open-endedness of linguistic meanings that can be formulated as follows: *the way we refer to our lived (or vicarious) experiences cannot be detached from the way we, as experiencers, experience ourselves at the moment of referring*. To make the last point more explicit, I will introduce and elaborate on the additional concepts of experiential field, relativity and relatability.

Experiential field

« 26 » To approach communication from a constructivist point of view, we must give up or radically reconsider one traditional explanatory principle widely used in the theory of language and in language teaching practices – that of *context*. At a glance, there might be nothing misleading about the term commonly understood as a situation in which communication between people takes place. However, this explanatory term hardly explains anything, because there cannot be one and the same situation, one and the same place for two people, even if these people happen to be together in this place and situation at a particular point of time. Communicators are different dynamic systems (organisms) interacting with one another, they are not one system, parts of which interact with one another in some shared environment known to this system in every possible way. Therefore, each communicator constructs her own *experiential field* in which she acts and interacts with other communicators.

« 27 » I will make the term "experiential field" more explicit by resorting to physics, where the concept of field has become indispensable for studying objects in dynamics. A field is defined as a physical quantity that has a value for each point in space and time. It means that there cannot be an absolute space-time continuum with the potential energy and forces of interaction (Einstein 1936: 377f). A classical "genuine vacuum" has to be precluded (Wheeler 1998: 163) because a field contains energy and occupies space. Richard Feynman gave a remarkably succinct description of an electromagnetic field:

> "[A] particle makes a field, and a field acts on another particle, and the field has such familiar properties as energy content and momentum, just as particles can have." (Feynman 1970: 10.9)

« 28 » If we try to translate Feynman's words into the language of constructivist philosophy, they will sound strikingly familiar to what Ernst von Glasersfeld reiterated many times, namely that:

- The experiential field is the surrounding environment of an organism in which this organism is isolated by the observer (Glasersfeld 1995: 123);
- The surrounding environment is what the experiencer "experiences of himself" only and nothing beyond (Glasersfeld & Varela 1985: 36);
- Other organisms who act in one's experiential field are those who act *upon* the knowledge one has imputed to them in the form of abstractions from one's experience (Glasersfeld 1995: 120).

« 29 » I will illustrate how we interact with other items of our experience in and through the field we are constructing or, to some extent, have already constructed. What makes it possible for us to hear a horn somewhere in the distance? Firstly, the sound as a physical quantity needs to reach our sensory organs, or to enter our perceptual (attentional) field. This means that the sound needs to perturb our sensorium as much as to create a difference to our organism "here and now" and cause us to act. Secondly, this sound needs to become a quality, i.e., be recognized as a horn, the recognition based upon all our prior experience with horns and hearing. The horn we are hearing now is not the same as other horns we have heard before, and this is when we begin to compare the sound with what we felt a second ago and what we remember feeling days or years ago. The result of this comparison lays the foundation upon which we construct our understanding of the horn, including the sensorial perception of the sound and its meaning. It is the distinctions we have made before that help us discriminate what we hear now (cf. "the difference that makes a difference," Bateson 1972: 459).

« 30 » The same cognitive procedure applies to the construction of linguistic meanings. As William James argued, names do not have a fixed meaning, but are constructed in the experiential dynamics of the subject, particularly, by what she experienced prior to the moment of naming:

> "[w]hat we hear when the thunder crashes is not thunder *pure*, but thunder-breaking-upon-silence-and-contrasting-with-it […][O]ur feeling of the same objective thunder, coming in this way, is quite different from what it would be were the thunder a continuation of previous thunder […] Here, again, our language works against our perception of the truth. We name our thoughts simply, each after its thing, as if each knew its own thing and nothing else. What each really knows is clearly the thing it is named for, with dimly perhaps a thousand other things. It ought to be named after all of them, but it never is. Some of them are always things known a moment ago more clearly; others are things to be known more clearly a moment hence." (James 1890: 241f)

« 31 » There is no single, or universal, context of interaction. In a communicative interaction, one communicator constructs a linguistic meaning in the specific experiential field generated by the previous dynamics of the communicator, this field can affect but never *become* the experiential field of another communicator. In the course of interaction, after all, the meanings constructed by the subjects may undergo some changes because the subjects can reciprocally cause each other to re-evaluate each other's and/or their own experiential world. Such a dynamic interaction can be illustrated with the help of a thought experiment. Take three basins of cold, hot and warm water. Put your left hand into a basin of cold water and your right hand into that of hot water, then move your hands into a basin of warm water simultaneously. Your hands will feel different from each other and neither will be able to tell the "right" temperature. Each hand has its own thermodynamic field in which there is no warm water although the two hands interact inside what we know by the meaning of warm water. However, if we give the hands a little time to interact with the water inside the basin, we will feel that they will come to some "consensus," i.e., the medium temperature generated as a result of the interaction between the extreme thermal fields. Paradoxically, the medium ("negotiated") temperature will not be the same as it was originally.

« 32 » Thus, if an analogy is drawn between the experimental hands in the basin and communicators in a particular place, we can say that two people may interact with an attentional object known by a particular name in polarly different experiential fields, which implies that one and the same name word can make them feel both "hot" and "cold."

Relativity

« 33 » Natural science seems to know no other figures as authoritative as Albert Einstein and Percy Bridgman, who proved that there are no a priori pre-given Kantian Space-Time categories and that all our interactions in the physical domain are experientially relative. "Whether a given property is absolute or not can be determined only by experiment, landing us in the paradoxical position that the absolute is absolute only *relative to experiment*" (Bridgman 1958: 26; emphasis added). Notions of time and space owe their meaning to the empirical basis and there is nothing a priori clear about this meaning even in physics (Einstein 1936: 358). Thus, when analyzing a phenomenon and/or its (linguistic) meaning, we must remember that neither can be defined outside the relative point of view of the observer:

> "[W]e cannot possibly conceive an objective world without a Subject, in whose consciousness it is present. Thus knowledge and matter (Subject and Object) exist only relatively one for the other and constitute *phenomenon*." (Schopenhauer 1903: 237, emphasis in original)

> "Therefore, 'Relativity of Knowledge' is no imbecility of our understanding, but results from the essence of being." (James 1978: 344)

« 34 » Linguists, Edward Sapir (1929) and Benjamin Whorf (1956), developed this idea and claimed that what and how we think is always relative to what language we speak, or rather, in what language we think. This principle of linguistic relativity, known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, attempted to break with the realist and analytical linguistics in which names are believed to be symbolic representations, or pictures of the "real world." Yet, "the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group" and "[t]he worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached" (Sapir 1929: 209).

« 35 » Analytical linguistics, especially in its newly emerging form of conceptualism (including Noam Chomsky, Steven Pinker and Ray Jackendoff), or first-era cognitivism (Kravchenko 2011), did not take a long time to attack the hypothesis with severe criticism. Believing in the existence of some conceptual universals and even concepts in the human mind regardless of language, they looked for all sorts of arguments and empirical data to prove why the principle of relativity does not work. For example, it was argued that language does not determine color perception. Eleanor Rosch's (1975) experiment with color categories showed that the Dani from New Guinea who have only two terms to refer to colors can recognize and remember a more complex range of colors. This led Vyvyan Evans and Melanie Green to conclude that

> "[i]f language entirely determines thought, then the Dani should not have been able to categorise and remember a complex set of distinct focal colours because they only have two basic colour terms in their language." (Evans & Green 2006: 97)

« 36 » There are a number of reasons why this line of argumentation falls down. First of all, Rosch never intended to disprove the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis; on the contrary, she approached color as an experiential category and demonstrated the perceptual and the cultural nature of color naming and color memory, all of which are impossible to treat in isolation from each other:

> "But what if both color language and color cognition are functions of some third underlying factor-color physiology, for example? […] Our discussion so far would seem to suggest that color categories are entirely determined by emergent patterns of neuronal activity in the human visual system […] The categories – red, green, yellow, blue, purple, orange-as well as light/warm, dark/cool, yellow-with-green, etc. – are experiential, consensual, and embodied: they depend upon our biological and cultural history of structural coupling." (Varela, Thompson & Rosch 1993: 169–171).

« 37 » Secondly, it was practically impossible to test the hypothesis of linguistic relativity in the described experiment. To prove that Dani subjects could distinguish colors independently of their language (semantic memory) would have meant using non-linguistic (non-semantic) means of color-specific stimulation.

« 38 » Thirdly, if some people know how to distinguish things within similar classes, it does not mean they distinguish *the same* things *as* all other people in the world. The experiment did not show that the Dani subjects recognized the same colors as English people do, they were only able to remember a range of colors and some best examples of each color. I may distinguish sweet from dry wine only and know no other terms for a thousand types of wine a sommelier may categorize in her language. Yet, if I taste a dozen samples of different wines, I may well distinguish for myself "the best examples" and "the range" of wines because I will be able to remember some wines as a little or much drier than others, not as sweet as others, etc. Does it mean I categorize wines in the same way (or even the same wines) as a sommelier does?

« 39 » James, in his theory of discrimination, had a definitive answer to this question. Even if we share perceptual and cognitive capabilities, we cannot abstract the same things from our perceptions, because

> "[T]he abstraction is never complete and […] no element is given to us absolutely alone, and we can never approach a compound with the image in our mind of any one of its components in a perfectly pure form […] [A]ll our abstracts must be confessed to be but imperfectly imaginable things." (James 1890: 508)

Language cannot be separated from the processes of abstraction and determines, if not coincides with, the way we construct a difference between what we see, taste, feel, etc.:

> "The names differ far more than the flavors, and help to stretch these latter farther apart. Some such processes as this must go in all our experience. Beef and mutton, strawberries and raspberries, odor of rose and odor of violet, contract different adhesions which reinforce the differences *already felt* in the terms." (ibid.: 511, my emphasis)

« 40 » There is one point at which the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis falls short, though. The belief that "we dissect our nature along lines laid down by our native language" (Whorf 1956: 213) logically implies that members of the same linguistic community may construct an identical world, and/or people speaking more than one language get a window on a new reality. These are misconceptions resulting from a typologically biased view of language as a diversity of national (sub)languages. Indeed, learning a foreign language helps us broaden our experience and make more differences in the world we are constructing (Druzhinin 2021: 88); every linguistic meaning, every construal we make of the world is still relative to our personality (Kenny 2020), no matter what type of language we speak as defined by linguists. This relativity is constituted by our specific experiential field at the moment of interactions. Linguistic meaning always has a relative experiential nature, because *our* words are what we have constructed in the course of *our* personal experience:

> "We cannot share our experience with others, we can only tell them about it, but in doing so, we use the words that we have associated with it. What others understand when we speak or write is necessarily in terms of the meanings their experience has led them to associate with the sound images of the particular words and their experience is never identical with ours." (Glasersfeld 1995: 48)

> "In its function, language is constructive because nobody knows the source of your story. Nobody knows, nor ever will know how it was, because 'as it was' is gone forever […] In its appearance, the language I speak is my language. It makes me aware of myself." (Foerster 2003: 297)

Relatability

« 41 » From the communicative, linguistic point of view, we are as an important part of the experiential field as other people. We construct experiences via linguistic meanings in a continuous process of interaction with others that is why other people's understanding of us regulates our experience construction, anyway.

> "To understand himself, man needs to be understood by another. To be understood by another, he needs to understand the other." (Hora 1959: 237)

« 42 » Heidegger (2010) made it remarkably clear how the subject cannot exist as "a self" without others (the *they* or *one*). Others appear as a form of modified existence of the subject, and the subject maintains her being-a-self as long as she maintains a difference from others. This thesis establishes a reciprocal relationship between the subject as a relative point of reference and others as a (source of) commonality of this reference. Being with others determines our being ourselves and vice versa:

> "*Authentic being-a-self* is not based on an exceptional state of the subject, detached from the they; but it is an *existentiell* [sic] *modification of the they as itself an essential existential.*" (Heidegger 2010: §130, emphasis in original)

« 43 » Our experience must be in some way compatible with other people's experience, otherwise we may fail to construct an adaptively reliable world. Von Glasersfeld describes this kind of compatibility as "corroboration by others" that

> "[…] helps to create that intersubjective level on which one is led to believe that concepts, schemes of action, goals, and ultimately feelings and emotions are shared by others and, therefore, more *real* than anything experienced only by oneself." (Glasersfeld 1995: 120, emphasis in original)

« 44 » In other words, when some meaning we construct relatively to our experiential domain is corroborated by others, we find confirmation in these others of our predictions about how others may act on this meaning relatively to their experiential domain. To put it simply, at a given moment of interaction with others our experiential worlds (and language in general) become as much relative as also *relatable* (Druzhinin 2020a).

« 45 » Let me illustrate the last point. Imagine that a young singer has to perform a cover version of George Michael's famous track. When we hear this cover, we will both perceive the young performer's individual style, her own singing of the song through her interpretation of the mood, melodic variations, etc. and recognize (recall, present to ourselves, imagine) George Michael's song, anyway: his style, his mood and his melodic variations. It means that the song sounds new (as long as it is a cover version and nobody else can perform it like George Michael) and old (as long as it is a well-known song by George Michael) at the same time. This is what I prefer to term as relativity and relatability of our experience, respectively. These two factors are dependent on each other, and this dependence, as I aim to show later, is crucial for the emergence of "bad" and "good" language.

X-phemisms in communicative interactions: Experiential analysis

« 46 » My method of investigating language is determined by the principles of second-order science and radical constructivism. According to philosophy of science, theory and observation must go hand in hand to produce evidence-based knowledge (Kosso 2011: 11). Our scientific understanding of language cannot be a self-sufficient theory, because "the linguistic universe is populated not by mysteriously unobservable objects called 'languages' but by observable human beings who somehow and sometimes manage to communicate with one another" (Harris 1998: 19). That is why all our claims about language in general must be experientially tested by means of observation of communicative interactions in particular. In the framework of radical constructivism, an observer of organisms is both a constructor of organisms and an organism itself. The latter means that, on the one hand, in hypothesizing about language we must be aware that it is a constructive activity of our own organism ("it is ever present and pervades all and every awareness of ourselves" (Richards & Glasersfeld 1979: 54f) and what we investigate is our own experience; on the other hand, as the observer of other organisms "we are led to believe in the objects, the other people, and the whole world which we actively create in the act of perceiving" as "real in the sense that we *do* organize our experience in that way" (ibid.; italics in original). Based upon these methodological claims, I will pursue an experiential analysis that goes beyond interpretation-based introspection and first-person descriptions of lived experience to finding empirical evidence in observable and relatable experiences of others (Druzhinin 2020a, 2020b).

« 47 » In the theoretical part of the article, I have provided a constructivist framework for conceptualizing language as a manner of experiential construction of self and others. Along these lines, X-phemisms cannot be recognized as dictionary items existing in the mind of language users as substitutions for less or more offensive words. In this section below, I will specify my constructivist hypothesis about X-phemisms. In my empirical research, I will proceed from the assumption that films provide a reliable source of empirical evidence for whatever claims are made about language (and X-phemisms), since behaviors observed by the viewer and enacted by actors, a director, script writers, etc. relate to our common ways of constructing experience and interacting with the world (Scholte 2020). That films can be called fictional becomes irrelevant here, because what is fictional or fictitious is (the evaluation of) the story told in the film (which makes it a cultural artefact in a broad sense), but not *how it is enacted* (which makes it a recorded interactional dynamics in a narrow sense). It is the latter that serves as an object of observation.

« 48 » I will investigate X-phemisms based on the communicative interactions presented in the American TV series *Desperate Housewives* (2004–2012). The choice of the research material is explained by the representative value of the TV show (a

wide range of communicative interactions covered due to the specific drama-comedy-mystery genre constraints and a high popularity rate worldwide).

« 49 » According to the definitional criterion of X-phemisms as pleasant or unpleasant words, they are supposed to provoke positive or negative emotions, respectively, in the process of interactions between people. I have selected communicative situations shown in the film where emotional reactions to words could be observed and classified into those of offense and embarrassment or non-offense and non-embarrassment. I will prove my constructivist hypothesis that *euphemisms and dysphemisms do not exist in language-as-a-system* because they are *experiential factors of our dynamic situational construction of others*. The logical method is proof by contradiction: I will build argumentation and collect supporting evidence around the following antitheses of the traditional view of X-phemisms:

- Words and expressions marked in dictionaries as euphemistic or dysphemistic do *not* necessarily function as such in communication;
- One and the same word or expression can be *both* a euphemism and a dysphemism or *neither* at different points of interaction;
- *Any* word or expression can potentially function as a euphemism *and/or* a dysphemism.

« 50 » I will begin with the "absolute dysphemisms," or words officially marked as derogatory or impolite in modern English language. One such word is the "dehumanizing and racist term"[11] *slave*, whose usage is recognized to be inappropriate, especially by American society, and which should be substituted by the expression *enslaved person*.[12] However, in the communicative interaction that follows, the word *slave* does not seem to offend anyone; it is the other way round – it functions as a way of raising one's self-esteem.

« 51 » The observed communicative interaction takes place at the home of a middle-aged housewife, Maxine Bennett, who is hosting a get-together dinner for her friends and neighbors, housewives just like her. As can be perceived by the way the guests react to Maxine's behavior at this dinner, there begins to appear a particular kind of confusion. One of the invited guests, Bree, is amazed at the exquisiteness and the number of the gourmet dishes served at the dinner. She cannot believe her eyes when she sees Maxine bring from the kitchen one deliciously cooked dish after another. Bree notices a look of surprise on the faces of the other guests and there is a good reason why the women are surprised. The viewer's experience with the previous episodes of the series as well as our common sense allow for such a construction of a "standard" housewife, according to which it is utterly impossible for a married woman to manage the household, take care of the children and organize such a well-planned dinner at one and the same time. The women participating in the observed interaction hope to find out what Maxine's secret is, but when addressed with the question, Maxine says that she has no secret and everything has been cooked by herself, because she knows how to manage time properly. In our phenomenal domain,[13] it seems to be a point where we construct the guests and Maxine as no longer belonging to relatable experiential fields, as the women find it hard to accept Maxine's explanation and are beginning to feel jealous.

« 52 » Everything becomes clear when we see FBI agents break into the house and find, in the kitchen, a Chinese woman who looks like Maxine's housemaid:

FBI: Maxine Bennett, you're under arrest for involuntary servitude. Is this the woman who locked you up?
Maid: Yeah.
Guest: Bree, what's going on?
Bree: Well, I'm not sure, but I think Maxine had *a slave*.
Guest: I can't believe it. I just can't believe it.[14]

« 53 » The observed dialogue between Bree and another guest, represented in the tapescript above, provides empirical evidence that our construction of these women reaches a point of the most stability and the least confusion the moment the word "slave" is heard. The word is perceived as an orderly way found by the women to organize what has been earlier observed as the experiential worlds shattered by Maxine's overly successful and superior dinner. The way that the communicative interaction is finalized at this point testifies to the positive experience of the film creators with this word helping to bring the communicative "chaos" into order. The situational meaning of the word can be interpreted in the observed situation as a "good-housewife" status earned back after the shock at the unrealistically ideal dinner. At the moment of interaction, we have constructed the two experiential fields of Bree and her interlocutor as fully relatable, and the language each of them chooses is not interpreted as a cause of any emotional disbalance. Therefore, the "bad" word *slave* does not feel bad in the experiential fields of the communicating women as we construct them in the flow of watching the film.

« 54 » A similar case is the dialogue between Karen and Roy appearing to the observer as two married people in their seventies. They are discussing Karen's terminal illness in the hospital where Roy has come to see his wife for the first time since she left him without any explanation. The viewer's experience with the previous episodes suggests that the disagreement between Karen and Roy was caused by Karen's desire to keep her illness secret from Roy to protect

11| "Everyday words and phrases that have racist connotations," by Scottie Andrew and Harmeet Kaur, CNN, 2020, https://edition.cnn.com/2020/07/06/us/racism-words-phrases-slavery-trnd/index.html

12| "Language Matters: The shift from "slave" to "enslaved person" may be difficult, but it's important," by Eric Zorn, Chicago Tribune, 2019, https://www.chicagotribune.com/columns/eric-zorn/ct-column-slave-enslaved-language-people-first-debate-zorn-20190906-audknctayr-arfijimpz6uk7hvy-story.html

13| The observer's phenomenal domain is the domain of distinctions of the relations and interactions of the unities that the observer distinguishes as populating that space (Maturana 1988: 9).

14| *Desperate Housewives*, Season 2, Ep. 14 https://subslikescript.com/series/Desperate_Housewives-410975/season-2/episode-14-Silly_People

him from sufferings he has already gone through in his life before, when his first wife died of cancer. Yet, Roy, in the observed dialogical interaction that is textually represented below, manages to persuade Karen that this experience is what unites rather than separates them.

Karen: I didn't want to put you through this again.
Roy: Karen, I married you for better or worse. We had the better, and now...
Karen: Well, what if I say I don't want you here?
Roy: You're *an old lady*. What are you gonna do about it?
Karen: I'm scared.
Roy: I know.[15]

« 55 » Roy refers to her as *an old lady*, which is dysphemistic and rude if treated in a prescriptive manner disregarding the experiential context.[16, 17] Yet, as we can see, this reference does not make Karen upset, instead, it causes her to open up to her husband about her genuine feelings. The observation of this communicative behavior does not cause any experiential instability in the observer as it does not appear incoherent or confusing. The reason is that up to the moment of observing the interaction, the viewer has constructed Karen and Roy as characters acting in absolutely compatible experiential fields in relation to each other. There is no need for the elderly spouses to relate to themselves the experience of being old in a specific emotional manner, especially in times of hardship, thus, the relative value of the term *old lady* is lost to the observer.

« 56 » Let me give an opposite example and show how a euphemism by definition becomes a dysphemism in communication. The term *madam (ma'am)* is considered to be a euphemism, i.e., "a polite way of addressing a woman whose name is not known."[18] However, a woman may be offended when the experience she has constructed is incompatible with the experience of who addresses her. In the communicative situation that follows, a police officer pulls over a car for taking the shoulder and breaking the traffic rules. There are two people in the car, Gabrielle (passenger) and her family friend, Hector (driver). Gabrielle decides to interact with the office on her part, because it was she who had told Hector to drive off the road against the traffic rules:

Policeman: Sir? You do realize the shoulder is used just for emergencies?
Gabrielle: Officer, hi. Are we glad to see you. We could really use a police escort to the bakery. It closes in 10 minutes.
Policeman: That's not an emergency, *ma'am*.
Gabrielle: *Ma'am*? Talk about police brutality.
Policeman: License and registration, please.[19]

« 57 » The viewer's observational experience with the film allows constructing Gabrielle in such an experiential field that the word *madam* sounds dysphemistic (even brutal) in this particular field. More specifically, at this point Gabrielle appears to us as a passenger who believes that she is at fault for the driver's breaking the law, but she cannot take it seriously, unlike the polite police officer. Her playfulness is explained by several experiential factors that emerge in the process of observation of the interactional dynamics prior to the moment of the traffic stop. For one thing, Gabrielle had failed to properly arrange her part of the dinner for Hector and his wife, invited by Gabrielle and her husband for a welcome meal. As a result, Gabrielle's husband, who had cooked all the meal except for a dessert, got angry and sent her to the bakery. Having had a glass of wine, Gabrielle asked Hector to drive her to the bakery in his car, which was not the best way to redeem herself. For another thing, she put Hector at fault by asking him to take the shoulder because they were in a traffic jam. All things considered, Gabrielle had been acting quite disrespectfully towards those around her and towards the law itself, but in our phenomenal domain she behaves in such a specific experiential field that this allows us to construct a relationally varied meaning of respect and politeness. In relation to others, Gabrielle had been acting disrespectfully and impolitely; in relation to herself, she had been acting normally, having met no opposition from Hector or his wife to her "resourceful" ways of dealing with the problem. She expected all other people to be in the same jocular mood and take the situation as easily as she did. That is why the formality and politeness of the police officer who disagreed with Gabrielle creates a state of relational disbalance in us, as observers, as our constructions of his and her experiential fields begin to conflict with each other and the dictionary euphemism *madam* feels rude and sounds offensive across these constructed fields.

« 58 » I will then show how one and the same word *stripper* can feel both good and bad to one and the same (constructed) person. According to the film's storyline, Robin is a young woman who has quit her job as a stripper, and circumstances took such a turn that she is now staying with her friend, Susan, until she finds some place to live. One of the women living nearby catches her attention as a prospective landlady whom she could ask for a room to rent. This woman, Katherine by name, has a specific experience – she has recently come back from a mental hospital where she was treated for a nervous breakdown. Robin finds her and Katherine's experiences absolutely relatable and, in the conversation, refers to them in such a way as dictionaries would consider impolite:

15| *Desperate Housewives*, Season 8, Ep. 15 https://show-english.com/LearnGroup/c99979d14eb34a9c9aea2bf843b0a0e7

16| "Who you calling 'young lady'? and other ageist language that needs to change," by Amanda Duarte and Mike Albo, 2018, https://www.aarp.org/disrupt-aging/stories/ideas/info-2018/ageist-language-glossary.html

17| *Collins Dictionary*, https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/old-lady

18| *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, https://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/madam; Cf. Macmillan Dictionary, https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/madam_1. According to the dictionary entries, this is a polite and formal way of addressing a woman especially in a shop. From this way of lexicographers' terming things it follows that there are less polite forms of addressing a woman on such occasions. Some women presumably may take offence at "Ms" or "Mrs." For these reasons, the word *madam* (*ma'am*) can be defined as a euphemism.

19| *Desperate Housewives*, Season 7, Ep. 8 https://subslikescript.com/series/Desperate_Housewives-410975/season-7/episode-8-Sorry_Grateful

Robin: Hey, and if this house gets too lonely, I'm looking for a room to rent. I mean, Mike and Susan are great, but it's getting a little crowded over there.
Katherine: Okay. I'll keep it in mind.
Robin: For what it's worth, it might take the heat off of you. I mean, no one judges the woman from the *loony bin* when there's a *stripper* next to her.[20]

« 59 » The observer constructs Robin and Katherine as women in whose experiential fields the references italicized in the tapescript above do not sound offensive at the moment of interaction. The viewer's construction of Katherine's experiential field appears compatible with the construction of Robin's. Yet, in a different experiential situation, Robin's interlocutor (Susan) is seen to act on the meaning of the word *stripper* in a way that causes instability in the observer as the conflicting experiential fields are constructed. As can be observed prior to the moment of the interaction, Susan took Robin as a threat to her family after Robin had been helping Susan's husband to get rid of the backaches by massaging him. The incompatibility of Robin's and Susan's experiential fields constructed in the viewer's phenomenal domain results from distinguishing Susan as a *married woman* who had never danced naked in front of unknown men, unlike Robin who was a *stripper* and could not recognize at a glance what was wrong with her helping another woman's husband. As we can observe in the dialogue between the two women, Robin was obviously offended by being called a stripper:

Susan: God, I've been trying really hard to be cool about all of this, but when I walked in and I saw you all over Mike...
Robin: When I was cracking his back? I was just trying to help.
Susan: While you were wearing next to nothing and straddling my husband! How was I supposed to react? You used to be a *stripper*. Don't cry. Why are you crying? *Strippers* are supposed to be tough.
Robin: Stop calling me that. (ibid.)

« 60 » The last example in my sample will show how one and the same connotation can be both euphemistic and dysphemistic depending upon how fully the observer constructs others or how fully organisms construct each other, or to put it simply, understand each other's experience. The connotation itself is not an ordinary word, but rather an expression, if by expression we mean a communicative behavior, i.e., bodily expression of an attitude taken as a whole, including mimicry, gestures, look of the eyes and sounds produced. The observed situation takes place in a hospital where Susan, who has recently lost a kidney, is talking with her mother (Sophie) and husband (Mike) about the odds of finding a donor:

Mike: Well, we're hoping to find a donor very soon.
Sophie: Oh! Wouldn't that be nice? I wonder who it'll be. You read all these stories. Strangers brought together through life-threatening circumstances.
Mike: Our best bet is a match within the family.
Sophie: Oh. Like Julie?
Susan: No.
Sophie: MJ?
Susan: He's nine, Mom. You don't take a kidney out of a 9-year-old.
Sophie: It'd take care of that bed-wetting problem, though, wouldn't it?
Mike: No, we were actually thinking that you might be a possible donor, Sophie.
Sophie: *Oh... Oh.*
Susan: *Oh*? What do you mean "*oh*"? Well, it's just... It's... I can't believe this. She's not gonna do it.[21]

« 61 » As the observed dialogical interaction unfolds, it seems obvious that Susan is offended by her mother's unpleasantly elusive answers to unambiguous requests for being a donor. The repeated interjection *oh* accompanied by a look of surprise and confusion on Sophie's face feels dysphemistic in our phenomenal domain because the experiential field in which we have constructed Susan and her expectations of her mother's help is not compatible with the experiential field in which we are constructing her mother as we observe her respond elusively to Susan's questions. At this point of interaction, anything Sophie says feels bad, as our experiential balance in the flow of observation is disturbed by the conflicting situational constructions of Susan and Sophie. However, we do not see the whole picture yet. As the series proceeds, we observe that, a few days later, Susan learns that her mother has breast cancer and this is the reason why she cannot help Susan. The reason why Susan's mother eluded the answer with "*Ohs*" was that Sophie did not want to upset Susan and make her feel more unhappy than she already did (which ultimately worked the wrong way). Thus, it appears that *Oh* was a positively euphemistic expression chosen by Sophie to show her refusal to be a donor and reveal the sad news. If we as observers had constructed this knowledge before, we would not have construed Sophie's "*Ohs*" negatively in relation to Susan.

Conclusion

« 62 » My research feeds upon and develops three important theses of radical constructivism in line with biology of cognition, all of which I aim to bring together in my theory of X-phemisms:

- Language is connotative because "its function is to orient the orientee within his cognitive domain, and not to point to independent entities" (Maturana & Varela 1980: 30). It is when one organism literally moves another one towards this or that experiential object.
- Connotations (words) in their function are dialogic, they are not descriptions of something but rather open-ended "invitations to the other to make some dance steps" (Foerster 2003: 296).

20| *Desperate Housewives*, Season 6, Ep. 15 https://subslikescript.com/series/Desperate_Housewives-410975/season-6/episode-15-Lovely

21| *Desperate Housewives*, Season 7, Ep. 12 https://subslikescript.com/series/Desperate_Housewives-410975/season-7/episode-12-Where_Do_I_Belong



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- Such steps are made in a dance, because orientation is still an interdependent, reciprocal process. We move another person, inviting her to make steps, towards something and only something that we have experienced ourselves, which includes *our knowledge about this person* in the first place. In other words, an act of orientating another is possible when we can be more or less sure that this other "has some of the knowledge we have ourselves found viable" in our dealings with the world (Glasersfeld 1995: 120).

« 63 » X-phemisms are a more complicated matter than substituting or avoiding words. Their semantic property is determined by interactional reciprocity in which one person builds up experience of another person and vice versa. Specifically,

- the emergence of bad and good language (i.e., meanings or words) is accounted for by the degree of relatability of experiential fields constructed by communicating people *in situ* (at a given moment of their communicative interaction);
- this degree of relatability is determined by how these people expect one another to act upon the meaning they make (a word they utter);
- these expectations are always relative to the prior individual experience these people have of one another.

« 64 » To make a list of euphemisms and dysphemisms is as hard a task as to make a list of pleasant and unpleasant people we can ever communicate with in our life. A usage-based model of language and communication cannot fully predict when and how X-phemisms will emerge. Yet, if we rely on the explanatory principles of constructivism that I elaborated on in this article, we can establish the following regularity of X-phemization:

- The *more relatable (or compatible)* the experiential fields are in which people construct a particular meaning, *the less relatively bad* the meaning will feel across these fields;
- The *less relatable* the experiential fields are, *the more relatively bad* the meaning will feel.

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Open Peer Commentaries

on Andrey S. Druzhinin's "Euphemisms vs. Dysphemisms"

Which Cognitive Processes for Which Language Experiences?

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> Abstract • Druzhinin adopts the perspective of radical constructivism to approach the use and comprehension of euphemisms and dysphemisms in communicative interactions, and makes a convincing case in favor of the deeply experiential nature of language. My point is not to dispute the relevance of this perspective, but rather to ponder about (a) the difference between written and spoken communication, and (b) how a radical constructivist perspective may underestimate the diversity of the cognitive processes possibly at work in linguistic interactions.

Handling Editor • Alexander Riegler

Written and spoken communication

« 1 » In §10 of his target article, Andrey Druzhinin outlines the difference between written texts and spoken communication, especially when it comes to considering the substitution of one word or expression for another. While the focus in the article is primarily on spontaneous communication, the examples that are considered from the TV series "Desperate Housewives" come initially from the work of writers who have crafted their scripts with the utmost care in order to offer viewers an entertaining experience. Although being a good writer means, among other things, the ability to produce interactions between characters that sound convincing and natural, one can wonder to what extent the sophistication of the exemplified X-phemisms is common in our everyday interactions. The question here is not whether such communicational situations can occur, but rather whether one often needs to deploy higher-level cognitive inferences to deal with these pragmatically complex situations. In §46, Druzhinin insists on the need to test claims about language with observations of communicative interactions. To assess the previous question, a random sample of recordings of spontaneous exchanges would likely offer an accurate basis (although likely at the expense of considerable work).

« 2 » Coming back to §10 of the target article, one can argue that for someone reading a text the question of whether the author of that text has consciously chosen a word instead of another, for the purpose of a specific illocutionary act (Austin 1962), is hardly ever a primary concern – unless one adopts a more scholarly perspective. One may be able to figure out an author's strategy, but doing so may be of relevance to a few readers only: as I am reading an intense passage of a novel, my attention does not linger over a specific word, but I am rather immersed in the wholeness of what is going on, forgetting the way things are told in favor of what I am being told. This makes me wonder, is it justified to say that written communication greatly differs from oral communication when, for most readers and