EUPHEMISTIC STRATEGIES IN POLITENESS AND FACE CONCERNS

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Resumen

El presente artículo analiza las implicaciones del eufemismo en relación con el concepto de *imagen* (Goffmann 1967) dentro del marco de la cortesía verbal (Brown y Levinson 1987). Para este propósito, la descortesía en los intercambios comunicativos se considera como un tabú de origen social sobre el que actúa el eufemismo mediante estrategias paliativas de carácter discursivo. De este modo, el eufemismo no se limita al plano léxico, sino que se constituye en una herramienta lingüística de carácter pragmático-discursivo cuyo objetivo es mantener la cortesía en comunicación, preservar la imagen pública de los participantes en el intercambio y, en consecuencia, facilitar la armonía social en las relaciones interpersonales.

Palabras clave: eufemismo, estrategias eufemísticas discursivas, cortesía verbal, imagen, acto de habla

Abstract

The present paper aims to shed light on the implications of euphemism in relation to the notion of *face* (Goffmann 1967) within the framework of linguistic politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987). For this purpose, I claim that impoliteness is a social taboo on which euphemistic mitigation acts and, with this in mind, I consider euphemism not only as a strictly lexical process used to tone down certain concepts deemed unfit for normal linguistic usage, but also as a more comprehensive phenomenon with a primarily discursive dimension. In this regard, a typology of strategies of non-hostile verbal communication is proposed. From this perspective, euphemism is understood as a powerful discursive tool used to enhance politenes, preserve the public self-image of the participants in communicative exchanges and, therefore, facilitate harmonious interpersonal relationships.

Keywords: euphemism, euphemistic discursive strategies, verbal politeness, face, speech act

Résumé

L'objet de cet article est d'analyser les implications de l'euphémisme en rapport avec le concept de l'*image* (Goffmann 1967) dans le cadre de la courtoisie verbale (Brown et Levinson 1987). Pour cela, le manque de politesse dans les échanges communicatifs est considéré comme un tabou d'origine sociale sur lequel l'euphémisme agit au moyen de stratégies palliatives discursives. Ainsi donc, l'euphémisme ne se limite pas

au lexique, mais devient un outil linguistique pragmatico-discursif dont le but est de maintenir la courtoisie dans la communication, de conserver l'image publique des personnes qui participent à l'échange et, par conséquent, de faciliter l'harmonie sociale dans les relations interpersonnelles.

Mots clé: euphémisme, stratégies euphémiques discursives, courtoisie verbale, image, acte de la parole

1. Introduction

Verbal politeness must be considered as the relationship between the use of certain linguistic units in communicative exchanges and the norms of social behaviour, as it has been observed by different scholars (Fraser 1990; Held 1992; Watts *et al*. 1992). In this juxtaposition between linguistic and social levels, euphemism is a phenomenon intrinsically linked to the conventions of politeness and social tact expected in interpersonal communication. To resort to lexical euphemism and discursive strategies of verbal mitigation tends to avoid or, at least, reduce the potential conflict that certain speech acts may involve in a given communicative context. In this regard, euphemism functions as a powerful linguistic tool to smooth communication and preserve interpersonal relationships in non-hostile verbal encounters. Thus, euphemism undoubtedly constitutes a faithful linguistic politeness marker within the approach followed by Lakoff, Leech and Brown and Levinson which favours indirectness as an ideal behaviour for mitigating conflictive situations and insuring the mutual protection of face.[1]

From this perspective, euphemistic use is closely tied to politeness by means of the notion of *face* proposed by Goffmann (1967) and developed by Brown and Levinson (1987). Verbal mitigation significantly contributes to reduce conflict and hostility in interpersonal interaction. In doing so, euphemistic strategies enable a space safe from conflict in which the interlocutor does not feel any threat towards his public self-image (or *face*), at least in a blatant way. Therefore, euphemism, face and politeness are interrelated phenomena which pursue a common aim: social harmony in communication.

For establishing euphemism as a verbal strategy and analysing its implications in relation to politeness and face concerns, it is necessary to adopt a more comprehensive view than the one generally followed in the study of linguistic interdiction. In fact, euphemism has been considered as a purely lexical phenomenon employed to substitute words and expressions deemed unfit for polite linguistic usage. However, I strongly believe that euphemism goes beyond the limits of a strictly lexical approach. Clearly, to reduce euphemistic process to a one-for-one lexical substitution would be to lose sight of the discursive euphemistic maneuvers which occur in everyday speech. In the light of this essay, it is thereby possible to consider euphemism not only as a lexical process, but also as a verbal behaviour which takes place in social discourse.

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[1] For an overview of the indirectness approach to politeness, see Held (1992: 139-142).

2. Impoliteness as a taboo area

Traditionally, it has been considered that a language user resorts to euphemism with the purpose of mitigating the potential dangers of certain taboo words or expressiones, considered too blunt or offensive for a a given social situation. Nonetheless, euphemism should not be limited to a linguistic makeup which allows the speaker's social goal to introduce taboos in public domain. Rather, euphemism is a more general phenomenon that participants in communicative exchanges employ with the purpose of softening the effect of what they really wish to communicate, avoiding, as much as possible, offence and conflict. From this perspective, any linguistic unit or verbal strategy which tries to avoid conflict in interpersonal communication can be said to be euphemistic.

Euphemism acts on taboos that the speaker attempts to tone down or disguise. Some of them, like death, scatology and especially sex have been established as taboo areas throughout time, as it has been highlighted in numerous studies concerning this phenomenon (Pyles and Algeo 1982; Burchfield 1985; Allan and Burridge 1991, among others). However, curiously enough, impoliteness has not been considered as a taboo domain despite the fact that it stands out as the source of many linguistic strategies employed to produce a socially acceptable discourse. Clearly, in formal communicative contexts, the power of social factors greatly influence verbal interaction. Indeed, in these contexts, issues of tact and social respect, it must be noted, give rise to a higher number of euphemistic substitutions than in those settings in which social conventions are not so relevant for communicators (cf. Crespo 2005).[2]

Under this point of view, euphemism responds fundamentally to a social interdiction[3] which has as its prime aim to maintain interpersonal ties, the speaker's and addressee's image and, in this way, to make conversation progress in a fluent and satisfactory way for the parties involved. For this purpose, it is necessary to avoid face-threatening acts such as directive speech acts (especially orders and direct requests) which may be felt to be too harsh in a conversational encounter and, therefore, inherently hostile. From this perspective, euphemism can be viewed as a twofold phenomenon: first, as a process which acts on taboo concepts traditionally analysed as such in the investigation of linguistic interdiction, as indicated before (death, scatology, sex, etc.); second, as a set of discursive tactics which intend to model that verbal behaviour which does not conform to expectations and conventions of politeness.

3. Politeness and euphemism

Verbal politeness, as a common conversational strategy in cooperative communicative interchanges,[4] constitutes a basic principle to analyse language as a social phenomenon and

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[2] In a diachronic study of euphemistic use in literary language carried out by Crespo (2005: 388), it is demonstrated that the need to avoid impoliteness in interpersonal communication is especially important in Victorian society and becomes less relevant from a quantitative point of view with the passing of time. Indeed, the number of euphemisms to preserve politeness found in 1850 is three times bigger than at present.

[3] Though I agree with Montero (1981) that society is the most influential factor in linguistic interdiction, I consider that the category of social interdiction should be reserved for those cases in which euphemism is direcly motivated by issues of social respect and polite behaviour expected in communicative exchanges. However, this does not imply that the category of social interdiction is absent from euphemistic substitution in other taboo areas where the linguistic taboo supposes a threat towards the speaker's and interlocutor's face.

[4] Kientpointner (1997: 258-259) considers that verbal politeness is related to a cooperative communicative behaviour. In this sense, this author maintains that politeness is a question of degree in a continuum between "total cooperative politeness" and "total competitive politeness".

stands out as an integral part of the different pragmatic theories which deal with conversation analysis. Following Leech (1983: 131-139), the *Politenes Principle* is divided into six maxims (Tact, Generosity, Approbation, Modesty, Agreement and Sympathy), out of which this author gives a greater relevance to the *Tact Maxim*, considered as "the most important kind of politeness in the English-speaking society" (Leech 1983: 107). These maxims regulate a linguistic behaviour oriented towards avoiding conflict and minimizing any threat against the individual's social image in communication. This principle implies, as Watts *et al.* (1996: 6) point out, reflecting on the extent to which certain communicative modes can be said to be socially appropriate according to conventional norms of social politeness. One can state that politeness shapes linguistic behaviour since locutions are emitted in relation with this principle, either with the purpose of respecting it or, by contrast, of moving away from it, normally with an offensive aim. Hence, politeness plays such a crucial role in communicative exchanges that it can be argued that being polite is even more important than the clarity required by the transmission of information in conversational encounters. That this is so can be gathered from Lakoff (cited in Fraser 1990: 23): "[P]oliteness usually supercedes: it is considered more important in a conversation to avoid offence than to achieve clarity".

Given the global character of politeness in relation to language, this concept has been analysed from different perspectives, depending on the point of view adopted by each scholar.[5] The most common approach to verbal politeness, the one followed in the present paper, claims that linguistic indirectness contributes to preserve the conventions of social tact and respect. This approach, as remarked earlier, has been defended by Brown and Levinson (1987). These authors take the notion of *face* proposed by Goffmann (1967) to claim that a polite behaviour in communication greatly helps to minimize the threat to the speaker's own social image or that of the interlocutor. To this end, euphemism stands out as a useful linguistic tool in indirect verbal strategies.

From this point of view, euphemism and politeness are mutually dependent phenomena in the sense that the need to be polite determines euphemistic use in a considerable way. The indirectness provided by euphemism, in turn, contributes to avoid offence and insure politeness in its double dimension: *positive* (oriented towards the public self-image and social prestige of the participants) and *negative* (related to the interlocutor's freedom of action and freedom from imposition in the communicative encounter).[6]

In this regard, the main aim of euphemism coincides with a basic discursive function, that of reinforcing social relations in interpersonal communication, what Malinowski (cited in Hudson 1980: 19) called *phatic communion*. For this purpose, the speaker resorts to a wide range of euphemistic uses which enhance social harmony in communicative settings, which, at the same time, preserves the image of the participants in communication. This euphemistic function is fulfilled by means of lexical substitutions and especially through discursive euphemistic strategies, as discussed below.

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[5] Fraser (1990: 219-236) reviews different approaches to the notion of *politeness*: politeness as a social norm (equivalent to what society identifies with "good manners"); politeness as a conversational maxim (an adaptation of Grice's cooperative principle); and politeness as a way to preserve the public self-image (approach defended by Brown and Levinson). Fraser claims that the latter is the most adequate to deal with politeness in communicative encounters.

[6] In this paper, it is not my purpose to deal with the euphemistic strategies used to protect face in both of its dimensions. Concerning this aspect, see Brown and Levinson (1987).

3.1. Lexical substitutions

Research concerning linguistic interdiction has usually treated euphemism as a lexical phenomenon. Given my purpose in this paper and the logical space limitations, suffice it to say that lexical substitution is, generally speaking, an effective way to mitigate the pejorative overtones of words considered too blunt or offensive in a given context. Clearly, euphemism responds to the desire to avoid certain taboos that can negatively affect conventional norms of tact as well as the speaker's and addressee's social images. This is the case in the allusion to certain taboo concepts deemed unfit for polite conversation, such as sexual organs and sexual play, scatological concepts or ethnic differences. In this way, the substitution of the terms *fuck*, *shit* and *nigger* for *copulate*, *defecate* and *coloured* respectively is a means of showing respect and deference, not only towards the subject-matter, but also towards the interlocutor.

3.2. Discursive strategies

Different types of indirect discursive strategies, directly motivated by the politeness principle as a socio-cultural phenomenon, are more obviously related to the speaker's desire to maintain social relationships. It is interesting to note that these indirect verbal tactics tend to minimize the illocutionary force of a speech act without modifying the content of the message. This is so because indirect speech acts offer a greater degree of optionality to the receiver and minimize their impositive or pejorative strength (Leech 1983: 108).

In order to avoid conflict in interpersonal communication, language users resort to the following types of palliative strategies:

- *Mitigating apology expressions*[7] like "I'm sorry to say", "I'm afraid", "If you forgive my asking" or the more elaborate "I wouldn't like to appear too inquisitive, but ...". These expressions constitute previous or subsequent apologies for conflictive illocutions, and, thus, are at the speaker's disposal to mitigate the face-affronting power of a distasteful speech act (cf. Brown and Levinson 1987: 162-163).
- *Pseudo-imperative expressions*, that is, those which downplay the imposition of certain directive speech acts, namely orders, commands or direct requests, modes of verbal behaviour which are considered intrinsically impolite in social discourse. Within this type of strategies, the following euphemistic locutions are to be distinguished:[8]
  a)   tag questions which accompany directive speech acts, as in "Shut the door, *will you?*".
  b)   hedging modal verbs (*may*, *could*, *would*, *should*, etc.). These mitigating modal verbs are employed in cases such as "*May* I ask you to put out your cigarette?" and "I *would* do it again", in which the verbs in italics soften the imposition of orders like "Put out your cigarette" and "Do it again", respectively.

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[7] These expressions have received different denominations. Montero (1981: 64) considers them as *atenuaciones por inserto*. Following Casas (1986: 155-156), they are *fórmulas eufemísticas*, whereas da Silva (cited in Casas 1986: 156) labelled them as *complementos desculpadores*. Leech (1980: 139-140) denominates them *hedged performatives* and Guillén (1994: 276-277) *estrategias de minimización*. More recently, García (2000: 74) has stated that this type of verbal maneuvers are to be referred as *estrategias de captatio benevolentiae*, and associates them with women's talk. This scholar provides examples like *No sé si será verdad, pero me han dicho que...*

[8] In the examples proposed in this section, the locutions which fulfil the euphemistic function appear in italics.

c) downtoning adverbs[9] (*possibly*, *perhaps*, etc.) which allow for some mitigation in conflictive utterances, as in the request "Could you *possibly* help me?".

d) downtoning phrases (*in a way*, *to some extent*, *by chance*, etc.), with the same function as the above mentioned downtoning adverbs.

e) conditional sentences used with the euphemistic aim to reduce the harshness of a directive speech act thanks to the optionality which the conditional clause involves (cf. Brown and Levinson 1987: 162-163). This happens in the following sentence: "*If I were you*, I would take that dog to the vet".

In consequence, any indirect strategy in the above mentioned examples gives rise to euphemistic speech acts directly motivated by conventions of tact and politeness. In this sense, these mitigating maneuvers stand out as typical resources in indirect communicative strategies and constitute the main exponents of verbal politeness both in its positive and negative dimensions. The following figure illustrates the above mentioned euphemistic modes used to tone down the illocutive force of potentially impolite locutions:
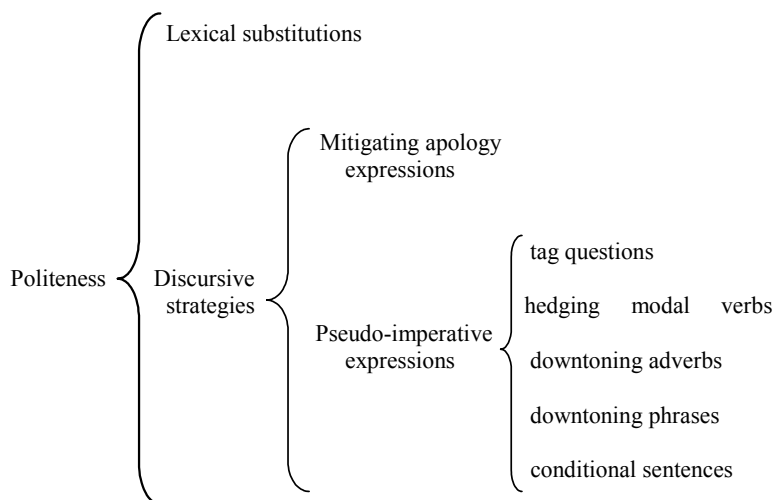
Lexical substitutions

Mitigating apology expressions

Politeness — Discursive strategies

Pseudo-imperative expressions

tag questions

hedging   modal   verbs

downtoning adverbs

downtoning phrases

conditional sentences

Figure 1: Euphemistic mechanisms motivated by politeness

The discursive behaviour of the mitigating and pseudo-imperative strategies provides us with significant data about euphemistic use in communication. These verbal resources function differently in discourse depending on the degree of formality expected in a given context. So, the greater the need to maintain the social norms of tact and respect, the higher the number of mitigating and indirect strategies. For this reason, the presence of these linguistic mechanisms determines the degree of politeness, as Vigner (cited in Wardaugh 1985: 271-272) has pointed

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[9] For Quirk *et al*. (1972: 452-458) downtoning adverbs and phrases fall under the category of *downtoners*, which they classify into four groups: *compromisers* (*rather*, *sort of*, *kind of*), *diminishers* (*partly*, *slightly*, *to some extent*), *minimizers* (*possibly*, *hardly, in the least*) and *approximators* (*almost*, *practically*, *virtually*). Guillén (1994: 169) denominates these euphemistic strategies *estructuras con función defensiva*, category in which this author includes modal verbs (*could*, *would*, *might*, *should*, etc.) and micro-discursive markers (*sort of*, *by chance*, *as it were*, etc.). Brown and Levinson (1987: 145, 162) adopt the name of *hedges* and *adverbial clause hedges* for the minimizing *adverbs* and *phrases* respectively.

out by means of his *politeness formula*.[10] In fact, a directive speech act with two pseudo-imperative strategies ("*With all due respect*, put out your cigarette, *if you don't mind*") is considered to be more tactful and socially appropriate than if only one of them is present ("Put out your cigarette, *if you don't mind*"). Vigner goes further on arguing that even the length of the *mitigating components* (in his terminology) also influences the degree of politeness in a significant way. Nonetheless, this author observes that requests formulated with too long euphemistic components ("*Would you mind if I asked you to try* to smoke somewhere else?") can be interpreted as sarcastic and, thus, have the opposite effect of the one initially intended by the speaker.

4. Euphemism and face-work

Apart from distasteful terms or expressions, it is evident that directive speech acts and assertions with an explicit distasteful reference also suppose a threat to the social images of the parties involved in the verbal encounter. If this happens, the main objective of communication, that of transmitting information from one person to another, may not be carried out in a satisfactory way. In order to avoid such circumstance, the speaker usually resorts to mitigating indirect strategies, that is, those euphemistic tactics seen in the preceding section, to insure the mutual protection of face.

Face Theory, proposed by Goffman (1967), constitutes a key element in the analysis of conversation. The notion of *face* is related to the self-image that the participants in the communicative context claim for themselves. In correlation with the double side of politeness, already mentioned, face is also two-dimensional: *positive face* (identified with the individual's desire to be positively regarded in social context) and *negative face* (concerned with the participant's desire to be autonomous and free from imposition).

Euphemism acts on each of these two dimensions of face: first, it responds to the speaker's need to soften potential social conflicts which may alter the interlocutor's prestige;[11] second, it supposes a way to minimize a threat to the interlocutor's autonomy. Thus, face is so closely connected with euphemism that the latter has been defined by Allan and Burridge (1991: 11) with reference to the concept of face as follows: "A euphemism is used as an alternative to a dispreferred expression, in order to avoid possible loss of face: either one's own face or, through giving offence, that of the audience, or of some third party". Of course, there is in polite social interaction a wish to protect the interlocutor's face by minimizing the potential conflict of face-threatening speech acts, which involves saving, at the same time, the speaker's own face.

As euphemism fulfils a social function, the use of certain locutions considered too harsh undoubtedly constitutes a potential danger both for the speaker's and addressee's public image (Allan and Burridge 1991). The extent to which euphemistic use is at the speaker's disposal either for avoiding offence to the address or for preserving the speaker's face is ultimately

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[10] In his *politeness formula*, Vigner (cited in Wardaugh 1985: 271-272) distinguishes four types of statements, from a greater to a lesser degree of politeness, according to the length and number of the mitigating components found: Ø–request–Ø, Ø–request–final, short mitigator–request–final-, long mitigator–request–final mitigator.

[11] Labov (cited in Trudgill 1974: 96) distinguished two types of prestige: *overt* prestige, characteristic of standard prestige varieties, and *covert* prestige, associated with lower-class language users. Euphemistic strategies try to maintain *overt* prestige.

related to the pragmatic variables which affect conversational encounters. In this sense, McGlone and Batchelor (2003) have proved that euphemistic use basically serves a self-presentational purpose, protecting the speaker's positive face without much concern for the addreessee's discomfort.[12] In fact, these scholars are skeptical about the capacity of euphemism to create a benefit for the interlocutor:

> With the possible exception of the communication of grave misfortune (e.g., *your grandmother has passed away*), we are skeptical about empathy's force as a motive for euphemism. Although the bearers of bad news may report empathetic concern for their addressees, these reports create a favourable impression (i.e., portraying the bearer as sensitive and considerate) and thereby can serve a self-presentational motive [...] (McGlone and Batchelor 2003: 253-254).

This need to preserve the speaker's own face is especially noteworthy in the case of political discourse, in which communicators avoid mentioning any term or resorting to any statement which could negatively affect their social image (more specifically, their positive face) and, consequently, their popularity among the potential voters.[13]

Granted that face is vulnerable in any encounter, participants will seek to avoid threat to face or show that no threat was intended by means of euphemistic strategies to minimize the conflictive illocution. Consequently, a directive speech act like "Put out your cigarette" requires a previous ("You had better...") or subsequent ("... If you don't mind") pseudo-imperative statement to diminish the potential conflict that an order without any mitigation may create. In any case, the use of a euphemistic formula must be adequate both to the interlocutor and to the degree of formality in the communicative setting. On the contrary, the speaker may be running the risk to put himself in a superior position to that of his interlocutor, losing, therefore, as Hudson (1980: 115) argues, social prestige in that context.

What emerges from the above discussion is that euphemistic strategies, politeness and face are so mutually dependent that there exists a reflexivity between them: the need to conform to conventions of a socially adequate behaviour motivates euphemistic use which aims to avoid offence in social discourse and preserve the face of the participants in the communicative act. In turn, politeness is defined by the euphemistic strategies employed and face can be measured according to the degree of euphemism present in social interaction. These mutual relationships obviously link politeness with face. All these connections are illustrated in the following figure:

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[12] In this sense, McGlone and Batchelor (2003) carried out an interesting and revealing experiment. In it, participants were expected to describe some distasteful stimuli (namely urine and excrements) from some photographs. The results obtained suggest that communicators tend to use euphemism for self-presentational purposes rather than as a means to protect the interlocutor's sensibilities.

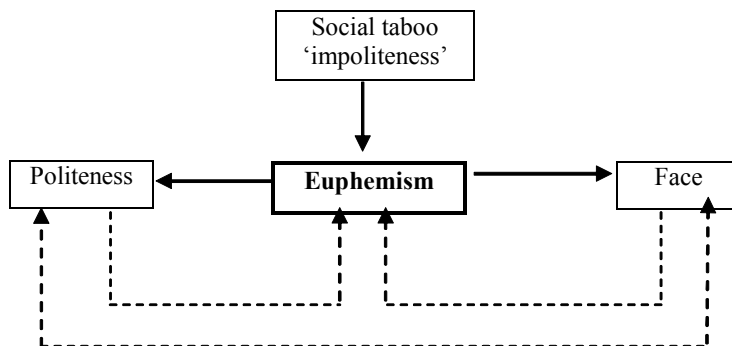[13] Concerning euphemism in political discourse, see Rodríguez (1991: 41-100).

Figure 2: The reflexivity between politeness, euphemism and face

Accordingly, in avoiding the threat of certain conflictive speech acts, euphemism responds to a double motivation, as shown above: first, to reinforce politeness in social discourse; second, to preserve the addressee's face, and by extension, his or her own.

5. Concluding remarks

In this paper it has been claimed that euphemism is intrinsically linked to politeness and face concerns. In fact, euphemistic strategies reinforce the notion of politeness in discourse as a socio-cultural phenomenon and contribute to save the public self-image of the participants in communication, especially by mitigating potentially conflictive directive speech acts, namely orders and direct requests. Hence, euphemism plays a crucial role in politeness and face-management strategies.

As face is vulnerable in verbal exchanges, participants seek to avoid threat to face by resorting to euphemistic strategies. It has been argued that saving the individual public self-image of the participants in the communicative encounter is carried out not only by means of lexical substitutions, but especially through euphemistic discursive strategies which greatly contribute to maintain social harmony in conversation and other kinds of face-to-face interchange.

In the light of this essay, the consideration of euphemism as a lexical phenomenon requires significant reconsideration. Indeed, euphemism has been treated as a primarily discursive process, which has led to view this phenomenon as a lexical-discursive marker of the notion of politeness in communication and as a social safeguard which preserves interpersonal relationships. Likewise, euphemistic discursive mitigation has been said to play a crucial role in both dimensions of face, acting as a preserver of the public self-image and autonomy of the participants in communication.

In sum, euphemism, politeness and face are undoubtedly interrelated discursive phenomena. As Allan and Burridge (1991: 7) maintain, "Generally speaking, the greater the oncoming face-affront, the greater is the politeness shown, and the greater is the degree of euphemism required". Euphemism stands out, in this sense, as a basic linguistic tool in politeness and face-saving strategies, which proves that courtesy should be stressed as a relevant

taboo area in social discourse. With this in mind, it is hoped that this paper will further contribute to the consideration of euphemism as a discursive phenomenon, which has not been dealt with in depth so far in traditional scholarship.

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