

Euphemism and Dysphemism in the War in Ukraine's News

Islam Al Sawi

Lecturer in English

The Faculty of Languages, October University for

Modern Sciences and Arts (MSA)

6th of October City, Egypt

ialsawy@msa.edu.eg

Ahmed Mohamed Alaa

Lecturer in English*

The College of Language and Communication (CLC),

The Arab Academy for Science, Technology and

Maritime Transport (AASTMT)

Alexandria, Egypt

ahmed.alaaeldine@gmail.com

Received: 24-1-2023

Revised: 27-2-2023

Accepted: 3-4-2023

Published: 30-4-2023

Abstract

This paper investigates the use of euphemism and dysphemism in the news on the Russia-Ukraine war. It highlights how each side of the conflict uses language to promote their ideologies and demote the ideologies of others. The study follows the framework proposed by Allan and Burrige (1991; 2006) for data analysis. The analysis reveals that the Russia-Ukraine war has not been only a war of arms and firepower in the military field, but also a war of words in the fields of politics and media. The strategic functions of legitimizing and delegitimizing actions are realized by positive representations of oneself and negative representations of others, which are crucial instruments of war propaganda.

Keywords: Euphemism, Dysphemism, discourse, Russia-Ukraine war

1. Introduction

The Russia-Ukraine war has captured most of the news headlines since its start in February 2022, and even before that. It reverberated across the globe and has impacted the lives of not only the people of the two countries but also most of the people worldwide. In addition, the Russia-Ukraine war has not been only a war of

* Dr. Ahmed Mohamed Alaa works in AASTMT on part-time basis.

arms and firepower in the military field, but also a war of words in the fields of politics and media.

Language is usually manipulated to reflect the ideology of each conflicting side during wars. This takes place through many linguistic techniques, such as “the use of biased lexical items, syntactic structures such as actives and passives, pronouns such as *us* and *them*, metaphors or topoi, arguments, implications, and many other properties of discourse” (van Dijk, 2006, p. 732). In times of political conflict, ideological discourse acts as a means of serving the political agenda of each side. van Dijk (2006) further explains that based on the *us* versus *them* concept, known as the ideological square model; this discourse often employs four strategies: “Emphasize Our good things; Emphasize Their bad things; De-emphasize Our bad things; De-emphasize Their good things” (p. 734). That is, the general aim of political and media talk is to represent the self positively and represent the other negatively.

1.1. Euphemism and Dysphemism

Euphemism, as well as its flip side ‘dysphemism’, is a tool to reflect ideological discourse. According to Allan and Burrige (2006), in light of Lakoff’s (1973) theory of politeness, euphemism refers to “words or phrases used as an alternative to a dis-preferred expression. They avoid possible loss of face by the speaker, and also the hearer or some third party” (p. 32). Therefore, euphemism is the type of ‘good talk’ that promotes and protects one’s self-image. It is also defined in relation to van Dijk’s ideological square model, where “a euphemism is linked with the speaker’s point of view, dysphemism with some other view – it is an *us* versus *them* situation” (Allan & Burrige, 2006, p. 49).

Dysphemism is defined by Allan and Burrige (2006), also in light of Lakoff’s (1973) theory of politeness, as “a word or phrase with connotations that are offensive either about the denotatum and/or to people addressed or overhearing the utterance” (p. 42). Allan and Burrige argued that political groups purposefully employ dysphemism against opponents to intentionally denigrate them.

1.2. The Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the use of euphemism and dysphemism by each side of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. It highlights how each side of the conflict uses language to promote their ideologies and demote the ideologies of others along the track of Allan and BurrIDGE's (1991; 2016) framework.

1.3. Previous Studies

The study of euphemism and dysphemism in political discourse has been tackled in many studies. For instance, a number of studies analyzed their use in relation to previous wars and political speeches (e.g., Abidi, 2015; Taugerbeck, 2013; Watts, 2013; Wahid, 2012; Mazid, 2004). Concerning the Russia-Ukraine war, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, there is a lack of studies investigating the use of both euphemism and dysphemism in the discourse of this war.

A few articles tackled the conflict between Russia and Ukraine in earlier instances than the 2022 war. Unikaitė-Jakuntavičienė and Matulkaitė (2017) analyzed the speeches of US and Russian political leaders regarding the Russian-Ukrainian conflict over the eastern parts of Ukraine. They spotted a change in attitude in the speeches of the US and Russian leaders towards each other and toward the situation in Ukraine. The US officials at first considered Russians as partners and later as enemies, and their speeches became of blame and dissatisfaction. The Russian side, however, considered themselves peacekeepers. Then, they started to blame the US as well. Although this study showed that political speeches are one of the tools employed by each side in a conflict to serve their interests, it was more political than linguistic and it did not provide an analysis of the use of euphemism or dysphemism in these speeches.

Temchur (2019) analyzed the discourse of the Ukrainian media during another instance in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, which is the Russian attack on a Ukrainian ship in the Azov Sea. The study attempted to discuss the use of hate speech, euphemism, and dysphemism in this discourse. The study found that euphemism and dysphemism were used by journalists and in quoting politicians to serve the interest of the Ukrainian side. Despite analyzing a number of instances of euphemism and dysphemism, this study only focused on the Ukrainian side concerning a single instance that occurred before the 2022 war.

The 2022 Russia-Ukraine war was the subject of a few discourse studies. Park et al. (2022) investigated the instances of language manipulation in Russian media during the war. They released a dataset that contains over 38 million posts and their reactions on Twitter (a US social media platform) and VKontakte (a Russian social media platform) from January to May 2022. Through employing a natural language processing model, the study revealed the changes in the agenda-setting, framing, and priming strategies of state-affiliated and independent media outlets in the covered period. The study, however, did not take into account the use of euphemism and dysphemism.

Kaltseis (2022) analyzed the language of Russian TV talk shows on the first day of the war. She focused on one of the biggest talk shows on Russian TV, which is *Vremia pokazhet* (Time Will Tell). She found that both the hosts and the guests made notable use of the same euphemistic language, which could be categorized into four main themes: Russia had no other option, Russia is seeking peace, Russia is seeking liberation, and Russia is defending and protecting itself. Despite its insightful findings, the scope of Kaltseis's analysis was narrow, where she only analyzed the language of one talk show on one day of the war.

Another study that analyzed the language of media in the Russia-Ukraine war is by Spišiaková and Shumeiko (2022). They analyzed media publications in Slovak, English, Ukrainian, and Spanish. They found that euphemism and neologism (newly coined words) were used to serve the political ideology of different countries through their media platforms. There was no mention of the use of dysphemism in this study, however.

1.4. Research Questions and Aims

This study attempts to address the following research questions:

1. How is euphemism used in pro-Russian news platforms regarding the Russia-Ukraine war?
2. How is dysphemism used in pro-Ukrainian news platforms regarding the Russia-Ukraine war?
3. What are the euphemism and dysphemism tools used in the analyzed data, according to the framework of Allan and Burridge (1991; 2016)?

This study aims to fill a gap in the literature by analyzing the use of both euphemism and dysphemism by pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian news platforms, covering more than one instance before and during the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war. This analysis attempts to reflect how each side uses language as a shield to promote its stance and a weapon to demote the other's.

2. Methodology

2.1. The Analysis of Euphemism and Dysphemism

Euphemistic expressions are located in the data based on whether they are alternatives to other face-threatening expressions and whether they are representations of the point of view of one side against that of another. In addition, euphemism can be achieved by many techniques, such as abbreviation, circumlocution, hyperbole, understatement, omission, substitution, and the use of colloquial expressions and jargon.

To identify the dysphemistic expressions in the data, the research uses the framework proposed by Allan and Burridge (2006) which refers to dysphemism as synonymous with speaking offensively with the purpose of insulting and deprecating the addressed. To this end, dysphemism employs the same techniques used in euphemism, such as verbal play, circumlocutions, part of whole/general for specific, hyperbole, borrowing, and colloquialism.

2.2. Method

Because data is limited, the analysis is almost entirely qualitative. Limited data is a tradition of qualitative research (see Cresswell, 2014, p. 239); despite this, the articles selected for analysis offer a significant account of the use of euphemistic expressions by Russian and pro-Russian media and dysphemistic expressions by Ukrainian and pro-Ukrainian media.

2.3. Data

The data for euphemism is composed of 15 articles from official online news sources in Russia, China, and Belarus (five articles each), constituting about 6200 words in total. These three countries are selected for studying the use of

euphemism in their news sources since Russia is a main party in the conflict with Ukraine while China and Belarus are known to be supporters of the Russian side. The Russian sources are *Russia Today* and *Sputnik News*, the Chinese sources are *Global Times* and *China Daily*, and the Belarusian source is *BelTA*. The articles analyzed cover the period from February to October 2022. Five major incidents are considered: the escalation of events before the launch of the war, the launch of the war, the EU and G7 joint action, Putin's Victory Day speech, and Putin's annexation speech. Table 2.1 summarizes the news articles selected for euphemism.

Table 2.1: The news articles selected for euphemism.

Source	Title	Date	Incident
Sputnik News	Putin: Russia has done everything to peacefully resolve tensions in Donbass	February 21, 2022	The few days before the war
BelTA	General staffs of Belarusian, Russian armies to work out steps to prevent war	February 21, 2022	The few days before the war
Global Times	Putin signs decrees recognizing two "independent republics" in east Ukraine's Donbass	February 22, 2022	The few days before the war
Russia Today	<i>Putin announces 'special operation' in Donbass</i>	February 24, 2022	The launch of the war
BelTA	Lukashenko: Belarusian army is not involved in Russia's special operation in Donbass	February 24, 2022	The launch of the war
Global Times	Russia 'ready to talk'	February 25, 2022	The launch of the

	after militarily paralyzing Ukraine in hours		war
Sputnik News	Biden: US, Allies to Revoke Russia's 'Most Favored Nation' Trade Status	March 11, 2022	The EU and G7 joint action
BelTA	Opinion: NATO uses Ukraine as gray zone in its fight against Russia	March 11, 2022	The EU and G7 joint action
Global Times	Russia says to publish retaliatory sanctions against West soon	March 12, 2022	The EU and G7 joint action
Russia Today	Russia's Ukraine operation 'preemptive' – Putin	May 9, 2022	Putin's Victory Day speech
BelTA	Lukashenko: Belarus will support Russia in every possible way	May 9, 2022	Putin's Victory Day speech
China Daily	Putin says Russians fighting threat 'near our borders'	May 10, 2022	Putin's Victory Day speech
Russia Today	'World has entered a period of revolutionary transformation': Highlights of Putin's signing ceremony speech	September 30, 2022	Putin's annexation speech
BelTA	Lukashenko: Peace in Ukraine can be achieved within days	September 30, 2022	Putin's annexation speech
China Daily	Treaties signed for regions' accession	October 1, 2022	Putin's annexation speech

The data for dysphemism was collected from 15 articles (comprising about 14000 words) from Ukrainian and pro-Ukrainian Western media, namely, *CNN*, *BBC*, *Ukrinform*, *NY Times*, *Kyiv Independent*, *AP News*, *Reuters*, *CNBC*, and *Washington Post*. It covers the period from February to October 2022 and focuses on five Incidents that are considered major by many news agencies. These incidents cover the first days of the invasion, the missile attack on a Ukrainian train station, the Mariupol steel plant siege, Putin's annexation speech, and the escalation of Russian attacks on Ukraine after the Crimean Bridge explosion. Table 2.2 summarizes the news articles selected for dysphemism.

Table 2.2: The news articles selected for dysphemism.

Source	Title	Date	Incident
NY Times	<i>Day 1 of Russia's invasion</i>	February 24, 2022	Beginning of the Russian invasion
BBC	Ukraine conflict: What we know about the invasion	February 24, 2022	Beginning of the Russian invasion
Kyiv Independent	Russia's war on Ukraine: Where fighting is on now	February 26, 2022	Beginning of the Russian invasion
Kyiv Independent	At least 50 killed by Russian strike on train station with evacuating civilians	April 8, 2022	Strike on a train station
Reuters	Ukraine says dozens killed in missile strike on railway station used by evacuees	April 8, 2022	Strike on a train station
AP News	Missile kills at least 52 at crowded	April 9, 2022	Strike on a train station

	Ukrainian train station		
Washington Post	At the scene of Mariupol theater tragedy, Russia prepares for a parade	May 5, 2022	Mariupol steel plant
BBC	Mariupol: Russia declares complete victory at Azovstal plant	May 20, 2022	Mariupol steel plant
CNBC	Mariupol steel plant ends	May 21, 2022	Mariupol steel plant
CNN	Putin's new land grab is dangerous for Ukraine – and the world	September 30, 2022	Putin's annexation speech
BBC	Ukraine war: Putin raises stakes in speech full of anti-Western bile	September 30, 2022	Putin's annexation speech
Ukrinform	Putin chooses to close doors to diplomacy, dialog with West	October 6, 2022	Putin's annexation speech
Reuters	Russia launches biggest air strikes since start of Ukraine war	October 8, 2022	Escalation of war after the Crimean Bridge explosion

CNN	At least 14 people were killed in Russian strikes across Ukraine, state agency says	October 10, 2022	Escalation of war after the Crimean Bridge explosion
Kyiv Independent	Kremlin propaganda more aggressive as Russia steps up attacks	October 28, 2022	Escalation of war after the Crimean Bridge explosion

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Euphemism

Several instances of euphemism were noticed in the analyzed Russian and pro-Russian news articles. These instances, overall, could be grouped into a major theme, that is, justifying self and legitimizing actions. The language used in the news articles had a general trend of trying to show that Russia's acts are justified and legit and that Russia is not an aggressor but a defender. This major theme can be divided into four subthemes, which are exemplified and explained in the following sections.

3.1.1. Depicting Russia as the side that tried to prevent the war but was forced to it

One of the main arguments that the Russian side keeps on stressing in the data is that the war with Ukraine was forced upon them despite their efforts to avoid it. This is reflected by some euphemistic expressions in the language of the news articles as well as that of Russian and Belarusian officials. For instance, in the articles published a few days before the launch of the war, the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, is quoted to say "I would like to point out that, from the start, Russia did everything to help resolve all of the emerging issues through peaceful means, in a peaceful way" (*Sputnik News*, Feb 21). The use of "Russia did

everything” is a hyperbole that aims to reflect the Russian side as the side that actively seeks peace and the other side as the one that does otherwise.

The same idea is even highlighted in the same article in its main title “Putin: Russia Has Done Everything to Peacefully Resolve Tensions in Donbass” (*Sputnik News*, Feb 21) as well as within the article, stating “Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that Moscow was doing everything it could to help peacefully resolve the issues between Ukraine’s government and the self-proclaimed republics in Donbass” (*Sputnik News*, Feb 21). Note the repetition of “Russia Has Done Everything” and “Moscow was doing everything it could” (so far repeated three times in the same article) to attempt to cement the Russian side’s story.

The Belarusian side follows the same trend in the pre-war article selected, where Belarusian Defense Minister, Viktor Khrenin, states “Minsk and Moscow do not want a war” (*BelTA*, Feb 21). It is also noticed that the expression “to prevent a war” is repeated three times in the same article, insisting that whatever actions in the making in Russia and Belarus were defensive in nature and good-willed. The same idea is reiterated as well by the Belarusian President, Aleksandr Lukashenko, in a later article, saying “Belarus has tried its best to prevent this madness” and “We are doing everything possible to stop the bloodshed” (*BelTA*, Sep 30). Note the use of hyperbole in “tried its best” and “doing everything” as euphemistic expressions to enhance the message they would like to convey. Hence, both the Russian and Belarusian sides seem very keen on exporting this image of themselves as peace-seekers to their nations and the world. The Chinese side, however, seems to be less insisting regarding this idea in the selected pre-war article, as it appears only once in a quote taken from Putin, “Russia has done everything to preserve the territorial integrity of Ukraine” (*Global Times*, Feb 22). Note also how Putin would like to convince the audience that Russia’s actions are originally aimed at helping Ukraine preserve its land, not attacking or occupying it.

Another side to the same subtheme is how the Russian side tries to show that their actions are the right and the only way to have peace. Putin’s statements show many examples of using euphemism in describing the Russian action, so he calls it “decisive and immediate action” (*Russia Today*, Feb 24; *Global Times*, Feb 25), “the only right decision” (*Russia Today*, May 9, repeated twice), “a forced, timely and the only right decision” (*Russia Today*, May 9), “inevitable” (*China Daily*,

May 10), “needed” (*China Daily*, May 10), and “the only way to peace” (*Russia Today*, Sep 30). All these overstatements denote the same idea that Russia attempts to convince the world with; that is, Russia was forced into deciding to undergo this armed conflict as there was no other means to achieve peace after trying all unarmed means. Putin is even quoted to provide a justification for this “decision,” saying that “Russia had to act” because “We saw the military infrastructure unfolding [in Ukraine]; hundreds of foreign advisers starting their work; there were regular deliveries of the most modern weapons from NATO countries. The danger grew every day” (*Russia Today*, May 9). The explanation and justification provided aim at attempting to clear Russia’s slate regarding the war with Ukraine and win the support of their people and the world.

This agrees with Kaltseis (2022) who found that Russian TV was keen on emphasizing the message that the military operation in Ukraine was Russia’s only option. On a final note, it is worth mentioning that the Chinese articles are found to be the least to use euphemistic expressions related to this subtheme, while the Russian articles had the most instances of using euphemism to reflect this subtheme.

3.1.2. The use of neutral labels to refer to the war

An interesting finding in the analyzed data is the high frequency of using mild and somehow neutral terms, that is, understatements, to refer to the Russian-Ukrainian war. Most of the news articles of the three sides under study rarely use the term “war” unless in the context stating Russia’s and Belarus’s intention to “prevent a war” as in “The general staffs of the Belarusian and Russian armies will work out steps to prevent a war in their region” (*BelTA*, Feb 21). Instead, they use other terms repeatedly, such as conflict (12 times), special operation (10 times), military operation (10 times), situation (9 times), operation (4 times), crisis (4 times), tensions (2 times), issues (2 times), actions (2 times), move (2 times), step (2 times), intervention (1 time), confrontation (1 time), and fight (1 time). Note the diversity of the terms used (14 terms) and the density of their usage (62 instances)

to denote the same idea while making use of a euphemistic sense which serves the Russian agenda of justifying and legitimizing its actions. Note also that all the terms used do not reflect the sense of an aggressor and a victim. They are rather understatements that neither praise nor accuse any side, at least directly, and do not refer to a certain agent.

To exemplify, in the Russian articles, the most used euphemistic term to refer to the war is “a special operation,” which stems from the Russian President’s own description of the situation: “I have decided to conduct a special military operation” (*Russia Today*, Feb 24). Adding the word “special” to “military operation” makes the meaning more hedged, blurring the boundary between an aggressor and a victim. This is also an example of substitution, where many alternatives are used to evade using the more blunt word “war.”

Moreover, in the Chinese articles, the term mostly used to refer to the Russian-Ukrainian issue is “situation.” This neutral and agent-free understatement can reflect an attempt to appear unbiased toward the conflicting sides. For instance, one article states “China once again called on the relevant parties to remain restrained and prevent the situation from sliding out of control” (*Global Times*, Feb 25).

In the Belarusian articles, however, although Belarus’s support to Russia is directly stated more than once in the articles analyzed, Belarus also tries to show that they are not aggressors and they are not a direct party in the war. Hence, when they refer to the war, they would use the term “conflict” repeatedly, which has a less severe connotation than “war.” The Belarusian President uses this term more than once in his statements, for example, “We will not make excuses about our involvement or noninvolvement in this conflict” (*BelTA*, Feb 24) and “We consider the conflict between the fraternal peoples to be a great tragedy” (*BelTA*, Sep 30). Mazid (2004), in his analysis of the use of euphemism/dysphemism in the US-Iraq war, found a similar use of the neutral and deagentialized term “conflict” to refer to the war. Therefore, a range of vocabulary is used to neutralize the situation, obscure the agents of this conflict, and create a distance from the conflicting sides to try to appear unbiased.

3.1.3. The use of political labels to refer to the regions under conflict

Another interesting finding regarding the language used in the analyzed news articles is how the regions under conflict in the Russian-Ukrainian war are labeled. Four regions have been under conflict, that is, Donetsk, Lugansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson, in addition to the Donbass region. According to the Ukrainian side, these regions belong to the Ukrainian land, that is, parts of a whole, while according to the Russian side, these regions are independent regions, formerly Ukrainian, whose people are willing to join Russia. Accordingly, these regions are generally referred to in Russian and Chinese news articles as republics or states. They are even referred to as countries in an article from the Chinese *Global Times*: “Putin instructed the Russian armed forces to ensure peace in the two ‘countries’” (*Global Times*, Feb 22). Therefore, according to the Russian side, these regions are no longer parts of Ukraine but whole separate countries. They are also no longer referred to as specific regions, but more general terms are used, like countries, states, or republics. Note, however, how the term “countries” was put between inverted commas, to indicate that this is President Putin’s label, which does not necessarily reflect the Chinese newspaper’s view. This also shows how Putin aims at portraying the Russian side as the liberator of the regions under conflict.

Kaltseis (2022) highlighted this claim in her analysis of the language of Russian political TV shows. She found that the TV show guests also stressed that Russia plays the role of the liberator of the separatist regions. However, Russia had another role in her data, which is the liberator of Ukraine from NATO, which is not stated in the current study’s articles. This theme of portraying military action as liberation is also found in other studies tackling political discourse. For instance, Mazid (2004) found that the American side kept on referring to themselves as the liberators of Iraq, a statement that was found later to be used only for propaganda purposes.

The same *Global Times* (Feb 22) article makes use of another euphemistic technique to refer to the regions under conflict, that is, abbreviation and acronymization. Therefore, at the first mention of the regions, they would give each an acronym: “Russian President Vladimir Putin on Monday signed two decrees recognizing ‘the Lugansk People’s Republic (LPR)’ and ‘the Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR)’ as independent and sovereign states” (*Global Times*, Feb 22). Then, the acronyms LPR and DPR are used to replace the full label

originally quoted from President Putin in the article. Again, the use of these acronyms serves a euphemistic function to alleviate the impact of the original label, in addition to achieving brevity and subtlety.

Concerning the news articles of the Russian sources, an opposite trend to the Chinese ones is noticed. Most of the labels for the four regions are more direct, that is, without quotation marks. Furthermore, some adjectives were used to describe these regions, such as “self-proclaimed republics, breakaway regions/republics/states, restive region of Donbass, and newly recognized republics.” These adjectives are considered euphemistic figurative expressions that denote that Russia has nothing to do with the conflict in these regions and that joining Russia is their people’s independent and free will to seek refuge from the aggressive practices of the Ukrainian authorities as claimed by Putin. The only time these regions were referred to as Ukrainian was in the negative sense when they were described as “former Ukrainian regions”: “Russian President Vladimir Putin delivered a historic speech on Friday at a ceremony in Moscow at which he signed treaties paving the way for the inclusion of four former Ukrainian regions into the Russian Federation” (*Russia Today*, Sep 30).

Finally, it is worth noting that there was no mention of these regions in the Belarusian articles analyzed. In the article published on the day on which Putin made the signing ceremony to officially include the four regions into Russia (Sep 30), the topics and statements covered in the selected articles were about the war in general and how Belarus would always support Russia when needed, as stated by the Belarusian President, Aleksandr Lukashenko. This avoidance of the topic may be considered euphemistic to show that Belarus has no interest in these regions and that its only interest is keeping its strong ties with Russia.

3.1.4. Depicting Russia as a peacekeeper and a defender

An integral element in the Russian side’s quest to justify and legitimize their actions is attempting to convince the public that Russia represents the side that stands with moral values, such as peace, justice, and cooperation. For instance, the base form “peace” is used 16 times in the analyzed articles, appearing in different forms (i.e., peace, peaceful, peacefully, etc.) and modifying different verbs and nouns to create an image that associates Russia with the embracement of peace. To

exemplify, in the Feb 21 article of *Sputnik News*, “peace” is associated with the verb “resolve” when stating Russia’s claim that it tried all means to prevent the conflict with Ukraine. This is stated three times: once in the article’s title, “Russia Has Done Everything to Peacefully Resolve Tensions in Donbass,” once inside the article as a statement, “Moscow was doing everything it could to help peacefully resolve the issues between Ukraine’s government and the self-proclaimed republics in Donbass,” and once as a quote from President Putin, “Russia did everything to help resolve all of the emerging issues through peaceful means, in a peaceful way” (*Sputnik News*, Feb 21). The Russian operation in Ukraine is even described by Russian officials as a “peacekeeping operation” (*Russia Today*, Feb 24), which is another example of using “peace” in euphemistic expressions, and another example of using substitution to evade mentioning “war.” What is more, “peace” is described by Putin to be the main objective of the Russian troops in the regions under conflict: “Putin instructed the Russian armed forces to ensure peace in the two ‘countries’” (*Global Times*, Feb 22).

The Belarusian President is found to follow the same trend, where he states that peace is the main objective of both Russia and Belarus. For instance, he states, “We have always come forward with peace initiatives in the international arena and continue doing so” (*BelTA*, Sep 30). In the same article, he adds, “Let us cooperate peacefully” and then states, “Belarus has always been a supporter of negotiations and hosted three rounds of peaceful talks between Russia and Ukraine” (*BelTA*, Sep 30). Notice the use of the different forms of the word “peace” to solidify the idea that Russia and Belarus seek peace and not aggression and to follow Russia by portraying Belarus’s image as a peacekeeper. Kaltseis (2022) had the same finding in her analysis, where Russia was portrayed as the peacemaker and peace enforcer in Ukraine.

Moreover, Russia is portrayed as a defender not only of its land and people but also of laws, agreements, and values. To illustrate, President Putin states: “Russia has so far denied plans for an attack, however, and maintains its actions in the Donbass will be defensive in nature” (*Russia Today*, Feb 24). According to Putin, this military operation is an act of defense against an attacker and not the opposite. In addition, the forces participating in the war in Ukraine are described by Putin as “the self-defense forces” (*Russia Today*, May 9), a substitution for “the

Russian army/armed forces,” which reflects the positive image that Russia wants the world to see regarding its forces in the field. Putin elaborates on this image in the rest of his quote: “the self-defense forces of the Donbass Republics together with the Russian military are fighting on their land... for the Motherland, for its future, to make sure that no one forgets the lessons of World War II so that there would be no place in the world for butchers, punishers, and Nazis” (*Russia Today*, May 9). The statement that Russians are fighting to defend their motherland is repeated four times in the analyzed articles, which adds a nationalistic sense to add another justification for Russia's actions. Putin here also employs another technique toward justifying Russia's actions, associating the current conflict with a well-known historical event that impacted the whole world, that is, World War II, positioning Russia on the side of justice and peace and positioning the opponent on the side of aggression and Nazism to gain the sympathy of the world, a clear application of van Dijk's ideological square model.

Note that this was not the first time Putin referred to the opponents as Nazis and to Russia as the savers of the world from them, where it is mentioned that “the Russian president said he wanted to ‘demilitarize’ and ‘de-Nazify’ Ukraine,” a statement repeated twice in the data, once in *Russia Today* (Feb 24) and another in *Global Times* (Feb 25). Putin clearly attempts to demonize Ukraine and show Russia as the hero that will take out this demon. This goes in line with what Allan and Burrige (2006) mention as one of the functions of euphemism and dysphemism: “Language is censored so as to reflect the representation of enemies as evil, aggressive, immoral, inhuman and unjust, whereas we and our allies are the exact opposite” (pp. 229-230). Putin also adds a patriotic dimension to the war in Ukraine, giving solace and assurance to the soldiers who are “fighting for the motherland” as follows: “The death of every soldier and officer is painful for us. The state will do everything to take care of these families” (*China Daily*, May 10). Note the use of the straightforward orthophemism “death” instead of more euphemistic terms like “loss” or “sacrifice,” which may indicate that Putin considers this military operation a duty that must be fulfilled and that death should not be feared.

Moreover, the Russian forces, along with those of Belarus, are called “response forces” (*BelTA*, Feb 21) by Belarusian officials. Therefore, Russia's

actions, with the support of Belarus, are viewed not as actions but as reactions, an attitude followed by the Russian side in many instances in the data. For example, the Belarusian Defense Minister states that these “response forces” will “repulse [the aggressor] if necessary” (*BelTA*, Feb 21). Putin also gave a statement carrying a similar meaning: “Russia has every right to take retaliatory measures to ensure its own security” (*Global Times*, Feb 22). Here, “retaliatory measures” is a euphemistic expression that substitutes “attacks.” Note that these statements were made only a few days before the launch of the war, so even before the offensive was made, there were attempts to justify what was about to occur. The same trend continued after the war became on the ground. So, the *Global Times* mentions in its Feb 25 article that “the latest move serves as a counterstrike against the Western squeezing of Russia’s security room.” Russia’s military operation is also described as “a preemptive move against future aggression” and “a preemptive rebuff to aggression” (*Russia Today*, May 9). These euphemistic substitutions intensify the *us* versus *them* attitude evident in several instances in the pro-Russian data to gain legitimacy and validity for their actions. This agrees with what Kaltseis (2022) found, where a main justification for Russia’s military operation is the need for self-defense against the Ukrainian threat and violations. Therefore, according to the Russian side, Russia is preventing aggression or countering it and not causing it.

3.2. Dysphemism

Dysphemism was systemically employed by Ukrainian and pro-Ukrainian media against Russia to magnify the offense and disparage Russians. It can be categorized into four themes/categories.

3.2.1. Anti-colonist labels

Labelling (aka. Lexicalization) refers to the choice of lexical items that imply positive or negative evaluations depending on the writer’s position, point of view, or opinion (van Dijk, 2006, p. 737); hence, it can be a powerful tool in the (re-)presentation of ‘other’ in news/war. The Russian-Ukrainian war was referred to with dysphemistic synonymous labels to raise fear in the audience by explicitly stressing the theme of death and killing. According to Allan and Burrige (1991, p. 149), death is the taboo of modern societies because of its “morbid and shocking”

nature; Allan and Burrige advocated that death taboos are motivated by various types of fear: the fear of the loss of someone, the fear of body corruption, or the fear of malevolent spirits, to name but a few.

In contrast to Russian-affiliated news outlets that used neutral labels to categorize the Russian-Ukrainian war as an ‘operation’ (see section 3.1.2), the Ukrainian and pro-Ukrainian media synonymously labeled the Russian attack in Ukraine as ‘war’ (91 times), ‘invasion’ (20 times), attack (66 times), and ‘assault’ (6 times, 5 of which with adjectives to exaggerate the assault: ‘full-scale assault,’ ‘full-on assault,’ ‘heavy assault,’ and ‘brutal assault’). Moreover, Russians were negatively referred to as ‘rashists,’ ‘fascists,’ ‘occupiers,’ ‘invaders,’ ‘hawks,’ and ‘monsters.’ Volek (1987) states that the meaning of such nouns/terms is intrinsically negative and hence does not alter over time. These labels, therefore, may help lambast Russians and their attacks.

Dysphemistic labeling was also used against the Russian affiliates in Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia. They were constantly referred to in two distinctive terms: first, they were described as ‘separatists’ in “Moscow-backed separatists, who work closely with Russian regular troops” (*AP News*, April 9), which etymologically denotes illegality and condemnation (cf. “the Separatist movement was initially illegal in England, and many of its adherents were persecuted by the state and its church. Often labeled as traitors, many Separatists fled England for more tolerant lands” (Britannica, 2016)). Secondly, Russian affiliates were referred to as ‘rebels,’ which etymologically signifies lawlessness: “resisting an established or rightful government or law, insurrectionist; lawless, from Old French *rebelle* for stubborn, obstinate, and ‘rebellious’ and directly from Latin *rebellis* for ‘insurgent’” (Harper, n.d.).

Hence, dysphemistic labels in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict are given to Russians and their supporters, with words such as ‘dead,’ ‘killed,’ ‘blood,’ ‘massacre,’ ‘blood thirsty,’ ‘grave,’ ‘mass grave,’ ‘pool of blood,’ and ‘war crime.’ These words were probably employed to intensify the Russian attack, show it as premeditated, and bring about fear of death in the audience.

3.2.2. Accusations of being mentally unstable and distrustful

The Ukrainian and pro-Ukrainian media used extensive dysphemistic terms to refer to the Russian army, Russian people, and their partisans en masse as mentally ill.

- A. "Nato Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg condemned Russia's '**reckless** attack'" (*BBC*, Feb 24).
- B. "The attacks led to a wave of **euphoria** among Kremlin propagandists" (*Kyiv Independent*, Oct 28).
- C. "German Kulikovsky, said the attacks were '**very beautiful**' and called for continuing them '**non-stop**'" (*Kyiv Independent*, Oct 28).
- D. "They [Russian propagandists] are **gloating over** the suffering and deaths of Ukrainian civilians caused by Russian attacks" (*Kyiv independent*, Oct 28).
- E. "At the scene of Mariupol theater tragedy, Russia prepares for a **parade**" (*Washington Post*, May 5).

Note how in examples A–E, Russians are referred to as mentally unstable who rejoice at killing and torturing others by associating positive adjectives, 'beautiful' and 'gloating over,' to deaths and suffering.

- F. "For them, people's lives are just a bargaining chip and a tool to achieve their **cynical goal**" (*Kyiv Independent*, Apr 8).
- G. "**The cynical behavior** (by Russia) has almost no benchmark anymore" (*AP News*, Apr 9).
- H. "We're already considered evil. **Let them consider us evil. It's better for us to be feared**, not to be laughed at" (*Kyiv Independent*, Oct 28).
- I. "**winter is coming**" (*Kyiv Independent*, Oct 28).

In examples F–I, Russians are described as being not fair and misanthropic; they are only motivated by self-interest and cannot be trusted. The allusion to the *Game of Thrones*' metaphor in example I emphasizes that idea and reveals, according to the Ukrainian and pro-Ukrainian media, the dislike Russians have towards Ukrainians; Russians are promising Ukrainians times of darkness and coldness for no valid reason.

This use of paradoxical word associations shows that dysphemism is deliberately employed by pro-Ukrainian media to disparage Russians and their

supporters (see Crespo-Fernandez, 2013, for an elaboration of using dysphemism during war to show opponents as mentally unbalanced).

3.2.3. Depicting Russians as violent and violators of international laws

Two consistent approaches were adopted by pro-Ukrainian media. First, while the Ukrainian attacks were generally described as ‘self-defense,’ the Russian attacks were ‘war crimes’ that violate international laws. The following examples are self-explanatory:

- A. “...stealing territory from a sovereign power and declaring it part of Russia after an unprovoked invasion – a clear violation of international law” (*CNN*, Sep 30).
- B. The Mariupol theater bombing was “most likely an egregious violation of international humanitarian law and those who ordered or executed it committed a war crime” (*Washington Post*, May 5).
- C. “Russia’s new land grab (...) [is] a long-term challenge to the international rule of law” (*CNN*, Sep 30).
- D. “It called this [capturing a rescue ship by Russians] a direct violation of International Maritime Law and the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea” (*Kyiv Independent*, Feb 26).

Secondly, unlike the Ukrainian army that fought Russian soldiers, Russians were targeting civilians. See the following examples:

- A. “**People, children, old people, women** are dying” (*AP News*, Apr 9).
- B. “Russian troops had targeted **schools** and **medical facilities** in Ukraine, and had executed, tortured, and raped **civilians**” (*Kyiv Independent*, Oct 28).
- C. “Governor Kyrylenko published a photograph online showing several bodies on the ground beside piles of suitcases and other luggage. At least one **man** lay in a pool of blood” (*Reuters*, Apr 8).
- D. “At least 39 **people** were killed and 87 wounded in a missile strike on Friday on a railway station in east Ukraine that was packed with **women, children and elderly** trying to flee fighting” (*Reuters*, Apr 8).

Note here how the pro-Ukraine media focuses on Russia targeting 'people,' especially 'children,' 'women,' and 'the elderly,' that is, innocent, unarmed people, to delegitimize and vilify the Russian attack.

3.2.4. Dysphemism against President Putin

Dysphemism directed against President Putin was pervasive. To disparage, demoralize, and demonize Putin as the initiator of war, a disrupter of world harmony, and a 'pariah,' Putin was described as a 'terrorist' in "Putin is a terrorist who talks with missiles" (*Reuters*, Oct 8), 'small' in "Putin (...) is a small angry man" (*Reuters*, Oct 8), 'brutal' in "the utter brutality of Putin's illegal war on the Ukrainian people" (*Reuters*, Oct 10), 'deluded' in "Russia has moved away from the rest of Europe and how dangerous and deluded is Putin's worldview" (*Ukrinform*, Oct 6), 'aggressor' in "Putin is the aggressor" (*NY Times*, Feb 24), 'hideous' and 'barbaric' in "hideous and barbaric venture by Vladimir Putin must end in failure" (*BBC*, Feb 24), and 'dictator' in "against Russian dictator Vladimir Putin" (*Kyiv Independent*, Oct 28).

Note here how Putin was described using words that are inherently offensive; they are words where "the most pejorative traits of the taboo are highlighted with an offensive aim to the addressee" (Crespo-Fernandez, 2015, p. 2). This negative lexis used to deliberately insult Putin is a technique used by political parties to describe opponents and hence agrees with previous studies, such as Muhammad's (2020), which showed how Donald Trump was able to win elections by using dysphemistic expressions that deliberately insult Mrs. Clinton, his opponent.

Putin was also metaphorically referred to as 'Hurricane Putin' (*CNN*, Sep 30). According to Crespo-Fernandez (2006), "in order to reify abstract elements, language users tend to relate them to our social and bodily experiences with the help of figurative (metaphorical and metonymic) language by means of which we are able to conceptualize those abstract concepts" (p. 106). The hyperbolic metaphor here attempts to link Putin to people's negative experiences with hurricanes with their devastating effects to picture Putin and his decisions as calamitous.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the analyzed statements and ideas represent the views of two sides of a major conflict whose impact is not constrained to Russia and Ukraine only. Therefore, it is expected that each side attempts to influence and even manipulate the audience to gain their sympathy and support and to strengthen its position. Ruziyeva (2021) points out that “The main pragmatic task of the media is to manipulate public consciousness and form a certain ideological picture of the world in the mass addressee” (p. 26). Euphemism and dysphemism are considered universal tools that can be employed to achieve this influence or manipulation.

Many euphemistic and dysphemistic tools were found in the analyzed data. The pro-Russian news media, for example, made use of substitutions, figurative expressions, abbreviations, hyperbole, and understatement. The pro-Ukrainian news media also used most of these techniques but to serve an opposite goal. Furthermore, the pro-Russian side employed euphemism to portray themselves as the peacekeepers, defenders, and the side that tries to prevent war but is forced to it. On the other hand, the pro-Ukrainian side employed dysphemism to demonize the Russian side and portray them as aggressors, mentally unstable, distrustful, and violators led by an immoral and demonic president.

Moreover, the study findings have shown a clear representation of van Dijk's ideological square model, where each side attempts to give credit to itself and discredit the other. The Russian side portrays itself as the side promoting peace, justice, freedom, and integrity, while the Ukrainian side describes it as the side promoting destruction, injustice, occupation, and dishonesty. Therefore, it is the ideological discourse of *us* versus *them*, that is, legitimizing self and delegitimizing other, a recurrent discourse in most political conflicts. In the end, shields and weapons can be made of words as well, not only steel and fire.

5. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The current study was limited to highlighting the use of euphemism by pro-Russian media and the use of dysphemism by pro-Ukrainian media. However, it did not consider the other side of the argument, that is, the use of dysphemism by pro-Russian media and the use of euphemism by pro-Ukrainian media, which

could be the focus of future studies. In addition, most of the news articles analyzed had a visual dimension to them, often represented by a photo or more in each article. These photos were out of the scope of the analysis of the current study. The analysis of the semiotic and visual dimension of the media covering the Russian-Ukrainian conflict can be a topic for further research.

References

- Abidi, M. (2015). Euphemism in Tony Blair's political discourse in the Iraqi war 2003: A socio-cognitive CDA account. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2, 8–28. https://www.academia.edu/12831950/Euphemism_in_Tony_Blair_s_Political_Discourse_in_the_Iraqi_war_2003_A_Socio_cognitive_CDA_Account_by_Mohamed_Abidi
- Allan, K., & Burridge, K. (1991). *Euphemism and dysphemism: Language used as shield and weapon*. Oxford University Press.
- Allan, K., & Burridge, K. (2006). *Forbidden words: Taboo and the censoring of language*. Cambridge University Press.
- Britannica, (2016, February 3). *Separatist*. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Separatists>
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th Ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Crespo-Fernandez, E. (2006). The language of death: Euphemism and conceptual metaphorization of Victorian obituaries. *SKY Journal of Linguistics*, 19, 101–130. <http://www.linguistics.fi/julkaisut/SKY2006/Fernandez.pdf>
- Crespo-Fernandez, E. (2013). Words as weapons for mass persuasion: Dysphemism in Churchill's wartime speeches. *Text&Talk*, 33(3), 311–330. 10.1515/text-2013-0014
- Crespo Fernández, E. (2015). *Sex in language: Euphemistic and dysphemistic metaphors in Internet forums*. Bloomsbury.

- Harper, D. (n.d.). Etymology of rebel. *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Retrieved January 16, 2023, from <https://www.etymonline.com/word/rebel>
- Kaltseis, M. (2022, May 11). Russia's invasion of Ukraine: The first day of the war in Russian TV talk shows. *Forum for Ukrainian Studies*. Retrieved January 16, 2023, from <https://ukrainian-studies.ca/2022/05/11/russias-invasion-of-ukraine-the-first-day-of-the-war-in-russian-tv-talk-shows/>
- Mazid, B.-E. (2004). Euphemism and dysphemism in the war-on -Iraq discourse. *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies (IJAES)*, 5(1), 171–188. <http://www.ijaes.net/Article/FullText/10?volume=5&issue=1>
- Muhammad, I. (2020). Donald Trump's use of dysphemism for mass persuasion. *Cairo Studies in English*, 2020(1), 95–109. 10.21608/cse.2021.147190
- Park, C., Mendelsohn, J., Field, A., & Tsvetkov, Y. (2022). Challenges and opportunities in information manipulation detection: An examination of wartime Russian media. <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2205.12382.pdf>
- Ruziyeva, N. (2021). Euphemisms as a means of manipulation in the language of news media. Scholars' Press.
- Spišiaková, M. & Shumeiko, N. (2022). Political euphemisms and neologisms in online media content: Amid the war in Ukraine. *Language and Politics*, 7, 372–388. https://conferences.euba.sk/jazykapolitika/www_write/files/2022/spisiakova_shumeiko.pdf
- Taugerbeck, S. (2013). Military Euphemisms in media coverage: Euphemisms in special contexts of war reporting. 10.13140/RG.2.2.24998.63041
- Temchur, K. (2019). Conflict discourse in Ukrainian media during the Russian aggression in the Azov Sea. *Visnyk of Kharkiv State Academy of Culture*, 54, 108–116. 10.31516/2410-5333.054.11.

- Unikaitė-Jakuntavičienė, I. & Matulkaitė, R. (2017). The Ukraine crisis reflections in the speeches of USA and Russian political leaders. *Slovak Journal of Political Sciences*, 17, 299–342. 10.1515/sjps-2017-0013.
- van Dijk, T. A. (2006). Politics, ideology, and discourse. In Brown, K. (Ed.), *The Encyclopedia of language and linguistics* (pp. 728–740). Pergamon Press.
- Volek, B. (1987). Semantic functioning of derived nouns in Russian. John Benjamins.
- Wahid, H. Y. A. (2012). Exploring the use of euphemisms in some speeches of president Obama: A pragmatic study. *Mustansiriyah Journal of Arts*, 36(58), 1–14. <https://www.iasj.net/iasj/article/67420>
- Watts, D. P. (2013). Military euphemisms in English: Using language as a weapon. 169–198. https://aichi-pu.repo.nii.ac.jp/?action=repository_action_common_download&attribute_id=22&file_no=1&item_id=1534&item_no=1

استخدام التعبيرات التلطيفية والمسببة في أخبار الحرب الروسية الأوكرانية

أحمد محمد علاء

محاضر لغة إنجليزية

كلية اللغات والإعلام، الأكاديمية العربية للعلوم

والتكنولوجيا والنقل البحري

الإسكندرية، مصر

ahmed.alaaeldine@gmail.com

إسلام الصاوي

محاضر لغة إنجليزية

كلية اللغات، جامعة أكتوبر للعلوم الحديثة والآداب

مدينة السادس من أكتوبر، مصر

ialsawy@msa.edu.eg

المستخلص

يتتبع هذا البحث استخدام التعبيرات التلطيفية والمسببة في الأخبار المتعلقة بالحرب الروسية الأوكرانية. يهدف البحث إلى استعراض كيفية استخدام كل طرف متنازع للغة لتعزيز توجهاتهم وأيدولوجياتهم والتقليل من توجهات وأيدولوجيات الطرف الآخر. ويكشف التحليل أن الحرب الروسية الأوكرانية ليست فقط حرباً بالأسلحة والقوة النارية في المعارك العسكرية، بل هي أيضاً حرباً كلامية في المعارك السياسية والإعلامية. تتحقق الوظائف الإستراتيجية لإضفاء الشرعية ونزع الشرعية من خلال التمثيل الإيجابي للذات والتمثيل السلبي للآخرين، وهي أدوات أساسية للدعاية الحربية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التلطيف، الإساءة، الخطاب، الحرب الروسية الأوكرانية.