

## **Evasive/Deceptive Use of Euphemistic Language in Discourse: Barak Obama’s Speech in Hiroshima**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Obama mourns Japanese and other casualties in Hiroshima and calls for ‘a world free of nuclear weapons’ as he became the first sitting U.S. chief of staff to visit the site of dropping the first nuclear weapon in history. His speech neither mentioned anything about the 1945 atomic bombing nor showed an intention to apologize for the committed treacherous and odious military act. The completely extravagant speech appeared to be carefully crafted to draw the attention to reconciliation rather than expressing guilt and asking for forgiveness. His speech stunned so many people who saw that his presence only should have been enough to appease the Japanese. All Japanese people who witnessed the catastrophe (dead or surviving victims) are in need for Obama’s apology to find comfort and are willing to forget and forgive. Quite the contrary, an impish rhetoric impinged upon them, and Obama appeared to be an extrovert who is seeking support for the upcoming election as well as for his plan of nuclear weapon proliferation as U.S. national interest bristles with tens of thousands of nuclear heads used as threat to the entire world. Furthermore, Euphemism is used in his speech to add insult to injury and to emphasize the “no regret” situation. Some went further to declare that the speech symbolizes the second nuclear bomb dropping which will take the Japanese people too long to heal. Obama’s predicament is that his blurred speech seems to have lost much of its initial impetus when he should have felt impelled to bluntly apologize to the Japanese people.*

**Keywords:** *euphemism, deception, power, disguise, reality, manipulation*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Euphemism is a mechanism deliberately used in languages for ideological control through the use of expressions that soften the impact of taboo words and eventually helps hide and/or obscure realities and facts. Chilton (1987:17) describes euphemism as shallow sentence processing, a mental model of an unformed object or event that has the function of dissimulation. Widely used case of euphemism is the one that entails an inversion of the meaning of words, Okamura (1982). This deliberate semantic inversion has long been known in political discourse as well as other types of discourse to respond to propaganda and hides underlying heinous acts, Rodriguez Gonzalez (1989). As the excessive use of jargon and high-flown style, euphemism is often resorted to in order to mislead listeners and to effect deception. The effects are devastating if language becomes infected with such flattering patterns since this conscious infringement of language use entails disintegration of language through deliberate lying and self-deception. Orwell (1969; 1978) called this phenomenon ‘doublethink’.

### **II. IDEOLOGY**

Turner (2003), Carey (1989) contend that the terms ‘ideology’, ‘popular culture’, and ‘culture’ can be used interchangeably. Carey goes further to stipulate that British cultural studies can be simply classified as ideological studies. Storey (2015) argues that one way to understand ideology is by suggesting a certain masking, distortion, or concealment. Ideology in this sense indicates how texts and/or practices present distorted images of reality, i.e. false consciousness. In this respect, the interests of the powerful contradict the interests of the powerless. Example of ideology in this sense is capitalist ideology where ideology conceals the reality of domination. In other words, the dominant group does not see itself as exploiters or oppressors. Exploiters’ discourse in this case reflects power relations, and eventually inequalities in societies. Another way of understanding ideology is through what is known as ‘ideological forms’, Storey(2015). More attention is paid here to the way discourse presents image of the world, and society is envisioned as conflictual rather than consensual. More often than not, discourses are perceived as ‘political’. They are built on the assumption that they offer competing ideological significance of what the world is or how it should be. Storey (2015) explains that ideology can simply be seen as a material practice rather than pure body of ideas. What holds here is practices of everyday life and not ideas about everyday life. Social order in this sense is marked by outrageous inequalities of wealth distribution, social status, and power poles. As often as not, ideology triggers the political scope of discourse. Obama’s ideology, deeply rooted in the American perception of the world order where the slogan “America always comes first” and the military superiority of the US prevail, was consolidated in his

speech where signs of recklessness, disdain, negligence, arrogance, exploitation, disrespect to the 'other' surfaced and stressed.

### **III. POWER**

Power is defined in its traditional sense in terms of 'control', i.e. controlling the actions of others. When actions are related to linguistic interactions between interlocutors, discourse of the powerful is used to control the discourse of the powerless. In other words, a handful of people have the freedom to say and write what they want, when they want and to whom they want. This practice (power abuse) can be classified as serving the interest of those who exercise power and against the interest of those who are powerless. Controlling discourse entails controlling the minds of the controlled, that is, their opinions, attitudes, ideologies and eventually their future behavior. Gramsci (1983) defines hegemony as people acting out of their own free will in the best interest of those in power. Social power of particular groups is measured by preferential access to material resources such as land capital, knowledge, physical and military force. Eventually, this entails control of public discourse, Van Dijk (2008). Typically, ideological discourse used by the powerful emphasizes the positive 'we' versus the negative 'they', the powerful 'we' versus the powerless 'they' through access to powerful language and manipulative linguistic strategies such as the use of euphemism, metonymy, dysphemism, metaphors, and so forth. This kind of communication degrades individual through distortion, coercion and intimidation.

### **IV. CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS**

Critical discourse analysis- an offshoot of systemic functional linguistics- is primarily interested in pressing social issues which it hopes to better understand through discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 1993). As for Fairclough (1989), the term 'critical' is used to show up connections which may be hidden from people such as connections between language, power and ideology as imposed by powerful elites via enacted laws, mediated media and governmental institutions. This is why CDA is always concerned with analyzing critically the language used by people who occupy powerful posts (leaders, presidents and decision makers), and who are eventually responsible for creating inequalities within societies. 'CDA is interested in the ways the linguistic forms are used in various expressions and manipulations of power' Wodak (2001, P 11);Reisigl&Wodak (2009). Van Dijk (2008) and Wodak& Chilton (2007) contend that CDA is based on social theories and views discursive and linguistic data as social practice and this results in producing ideologies in society. As result, all CDA approaches must not only be considered as tools, but also as discourse theories. Wodak (2004a) postulates that doing CDA is not just a matter of analyzing structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power or control as they are manifested in language. She stresses the need for interdisciplinary work in order to reach an understanding of how language functions in constituting and transmitting knowledge, in organizing social institutions or in exercising asymmetries in power and dominance in societies. The surrounding context gives the words prominence and authority and ultimately preserves power stratifications in the social structure. At this point, CDA becomes imminent in uncovering the ways in which discourse produces and reproduces inequalities and dominance in societies. Wodak distinguishes four levels of context: the actual or immediate use of language and text, the relationship between utterances, texts, discourses and genres, the extra-linguistic sociological and institutional context of discourse, and the socio-political and historical contexts. According to her, power and dominance lie within these four levels, Wodak (2001). Analyzing Obama's speech in Hiroshima shall stem from these four levels of context combined. In addition, American ideology that is centered upon supremacy and leadership gives insights and leads the analysis to the core of the intended meaning.

### **V. EUPHEMISM**

The word 'euphemism' was first put forward by George Blunt in 1580s. Derived from Greek, euphemisms are words of 'good omen' or 'good speech' literally. Up to date, there is no universal agreement about the definition of euphemism. Generally, euphemism is often defined as 'substituting an inoffensive or pleasant term for a more explicit, offensive one, thereby veneering the truth by using kind words' (Neaman& Silver, 1983, p.4).

Dynamism and negotiability are characteristics of words. Word choice and the changeable nature of meaning form tedious and tiresome nuances that pose challenge to the speaker/writer as well as to the hearer/reader. Euphemism are powerful linguistic tools that 'are embedded so deeply in our language the few of us, even those who pride themselves on being plainspoken, ever get through a day without using them', (Rawson, 1981:1). They are socially and emotionally oriented and allow for discussing taboo subjects without outraging other people. Euphemism as indispensable linguistic tools are meant to protect speaker/hearer from loom large effrontery and offence, and in order for communication to progress smoothly and without conflict, accommodations are continually, and often subconsciously, made. Interpretation varies according to context, i.e. whether the speaker means the term to be euphemistic, and the hearer interprets it in the light (Warren, 1992).

Objective euphemism classification is a grey area, and interpretation remains completely dependent on the person (hearer) and the context.

This paper is modelled on Warren's (1992) classification of euphemism formation, namely, semantic innovation, i.e. novel sense for some established word or word combination is created. Acceptability of the new meaning is totally dependent on desirability, i.e. if the novel term is a 'desirable alternative' depending on the purpose it serves.

Warren classified seven categories of semantic innovation among which cases of deliberate semantic inversion, namely, metonymy (whole for part or part for whole), reversal (reference to something 'bad' by using opposites), understatement (litotes), and overstatement (hyperbole) are going to be investigated in this paper.

## VI. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Artistic concerns aside, it should be mentioned that there is a dark side to euphemism. This centers mainly on political and military 'double-talk', which is designed to intentionally deceive, 'to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind' (Rawson, 1981:4). As a result, deception and manipulation through lies and changing of realities (consciously in almost all cases) of audience and the self is imminent. To illustrate how euphemism may be exploited to deceive both the public and one's self, Obama's speech in Hiroshima is investigated regarding the use of this powerful deceptive linguistic device. Deliberate semantic inversion in Obama's speech instills ambivalence towards people's feelings and eventually the way Japanese people in particular perceive his visit and his highly emotive expressions and euphemistic language. Obama was able of great dissimulation and hypocrisy.

With the naissance and development of cognitive linguistics, conceptual metonymy has been emphasized by linguists, and as stated by Lakoff (1987), metonymy is one of the basic characteristics of cognition. It is extremely common for people to take one well-understood or easy to perceive aspect of something and use it to stand either for the thing as a whole or for some other aspect or part of it. For these cognitive features and functions of metonymy, there is no difficulty associating conceptual metonymy with the formation of euphemism. There are mainly two types of metonymic approaches to the generating mechanism of euphemism, that is, whole and part metonymic relationship and part and part metonymic relationship, Shi and Sheng (2011); Weizhong, & Shujuan, (2006).

From the start of the speech, Obama invokes a collective, and ill-defined sense of victimhood, or rather a *universal* complicity in the atrocities he describes. This essentially amounts to a disavowal of the victim-victimizer dichotomy and a rejection of moral responsibility, accountability, and guilt. This, in essence, is absolution; he absolves the victimizer of crimes committed by attempting to convince us of some more broadly human victimization or some sense of collective guilt or responsibility. Not merely that, he attributes the catastrophe not to the militarization and imperial domination of western culture, but to an innate quintessentially 'human' trait, to 'base instincts' and to 'an old pattern', thereby not only representing the catastrophe as inevitable- and by extension, permissible - but implicitly making criminals and human-rights violators of us all. Obama's purposeful execution of metonymy was particularly prevalent in his speech. The exertion of authority through access to powerful language by making use of metonymy to deceive audience was very well implemented in his speech. For example, he does not offer lucid and candid distinctions between 'them' and 'us' but refers to 'mankind', to 'every continent', to 'us as a species', to 'men, women, children, no different than us', and to 'peoples', 'nations', and 'the history of civilization', and as such even goes on to refer to acts of imperial, colonial, or military aggression as a form of *self-harm* and *self-destruction*, of the human race as 'destroy[ing] *itself*'. In addition, Obama, when referencing prisoners of war, he neglects reference to 'war' in preference to mere 'prisoners'. While this omission may seem inconsequential, it must be noted that while 'war prisoners' or 'prisoners of war' have connotations of oppression, suffering and so forth, mere 'prisoners' carries allusions to criminality. Therefore, not only through use of metaphoric, metonymic and euphemistic language, but through omission, Obama dissolves the victim-victimizer dichotomy.

Obama purposefully used the general word instead of specific so people may think that these Americans were just prisoners in Japan for other reasons other than war prisoners, and Japan is obliged to protect them under international law. Eventually, once this image is constructed, it is possible, even likely, that the public blames the Japanese for their negligence and failure to secure these prisoners who were originally captured in combat as navy aviators and are force sergeants.

Obama employs a number of rhetorical strategies in this speech: euphemism, tautology, omission, metonymy, periphrasis, hyperbole, synecdoche, personification, allusion and creative abstraction. Euphemism dominates this speech in its entirety. For example, instead of alluding to the nuclear weapon dropped over Hiroshima by an American bomber during WW2, his description is storied, semi-fictionalised, and hyperbolic: 'on a bright cloudless morning, death fell from the sky [...] a flash of light and a wall of fire destroyed a city'. The vernacular is evasive, euphemistic, and abstract; notice in particular his use - and recurrent use- of the word death, the causes of which can be either natural or unnatural, timely or premature, and not the more revealing

word 'murder', which would be more appropriate given the historical context. Not merely that, the fragment contains Biblical allusion, as if the tragedy was an act of God, something divine and therefore, once again, something inevitable, even permissible, and even goes on to sentimentalize and exalt the murdered in phrases such as 'their souls speak to us', 'we listen to a silent city', and 'we remember the innocents killed'. Obama's Biblical preamble gives the American army license to kill by invoking and portraying the act of God as something unavoidable. Moreover, implied reference to the Middle East and Islam, in particular, the phrase 'no religion has been spared from believers who have claimed their faith as a license to kill', is meant to divert the audience attention to a different type of killing, namely, the killing in the name of religion, other than the killing caused by the nuclear bomb dropped by the Americans.

He goes on to refer to the atomic bomb in the following terms (and once again has the temerity to avoid and omit any direct reference to American complicity and the reality of Hiroshima): 'unspeakable depravity'; 'mushroom cloud'; 'killing machines'; 'doom'; 'silent cry'; 'that fateful day'; 'that story'; and 'evil'. His vocabulary, rhetorically embellished as it is, has an excess of emotion but a patent lack of precision, and this essentially represents a rhetorical-colonial disavowal of the history of victim nation and the direct complicity of the imperial western power. An extreme case of euphemism involves an obvious semantic reversal; for example, 'terrible force' is used instead of 'nuclear bombs'; 'means' instead of 'lethal weaponry'; 'American prisoners' instead of 'combatants or soldiers engaged in war'; 'capabilities' instead of 'nuclear weapons'; 'technological progress' instead of 'arsenal'; 'eye of history' instead of 'treacherous act of dropping the atomic bomb'; 'bomb *fell*' instead of 'bomb *dropped* by American jet fighters', and so forth.

One could also consider some dissimulated ways of manipulation is an attempt to make use of litotes in discourse. A series of examples of such confirmation is expressed by the use of negating the contrary. Examples are: 'in the not so distant past', 'no different than us', 'no longer be with us', 'has never been easy', and 'not as the dawn of atomic warfare', and so forth. In addition to metaphoric, metonymic, and euphemistic language, this adds a further level of abstraction to the speech.

More often than not, hyperbolic language is also used in Obama's speech to create exaggerated effect on the audience to serve a particular purpose, namely, manipulation. This entails the use of exaggerated claims ('the history of civilization is filled with war', 'people have been subjugated and liberated', etc.), modifiers and qualifiers ('irreducible worth', 'persistent efforts', 'oppressed people'), highly emotive language ('suffer', 'women and children', 'shot', 'starved', 'gassed to death', 'faith', 'the first smile from our children in the morning', 'the gentle touch from a spouse over the kitchen table', etc.), and powerful vocabulary ('terrible', 'unleashed', 'destroy', 'unmatched destruction', etc.).

There is an obvious scarcity of detail, which is substituted for rhetorical and emotive excess (hyperbole), circumlocution, sentimentality, grandiose but ultimately irrelevant pontification on the abuses of religion and the existential dangers of unfettered technologization, and philosophical and anthropological digressions on the nature of Man (periphrasis). Moreover, he returns again and again to the same point, often rephrasing or paraphrasing particular sentiments, the main one being: this is the fault, irreversible, and divinely ordained, in the nature of humanity. Repetition and tautology, therefore, are other noticeable aspects of this speech, and he does not advance any other point save that of the universal culpability of mankind.

The conclusion of his speech is narcissistic, colonialist, and propagandistic in nature; he exalts the American constitution and sets up America as the exemplar of peace in the world to which every country and all humanity should condescend. He offers an inclusive idea of peace as defined by America which is, in his words, 'an ideal to be strived for'. In his speech, it is obvious that on the one hand, the American ideology is centered upon supremacy and leadership, and on the other hand, it is centered upon disrespect and disdain for the 'other'.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Obama's verbiage made use of widely available manipulative techniques in discourse formulation and execution such as semantic inversion, excessive use of jargon, rhetorical embellishment, euphemism, and so forth, to disguise reality and eventually to confuse and mislead audience. Arguably, Obama's visit as well as his speech in Hiroshima represent a concealed, implied and embedded threat to Japan and the Japanese people as well. The whole world knows that Japan is an industrialized country capable of manufacturing weapons of mass-destruction, and America knows that this is a fact. The visit and the 'loaded speech' came as a reminder to Japan that America is still the sole super power, and that it is ready to strike again.

Obama should have started his 'historic' speech as: 'Dear Japanese, allow me to apologize on behalf of the American people for the sorrow, suffering and the pain you went through as a result of the despicable act committed by the American forces 71 years ago when atomic bombs, dropped by American pilots from American airplanes, resulted in the killing of hundreds of thousands of innocent Japanese people. Please accept my apology as well as the apology of the American people, and we ask for your forgiveness. America is willing to work with the Japanese government to arrange for suitable compensations based on war-crime laws'. Obama should have considered being straightforward and avoided linguistically high-flown style to put an end to 71

years of planned of any wrongdoing. Ideally, the speech should not have been characterized by stylistic excess and rhetorical flair, since such linguistic characteristics rather obscured, even inverted, the intended message. The speech takes the form of absolution, not apology; he is reluctant, on behalf of his country, to take –or admit to –responsibility or accountability.

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## Appendix

Here is the full text of his speech at the site, as recorded by the New York Times:

Seventy-one years ago, on a bright cloudless morning, death fell from the sky and the world was changed. A flash of light and a wall of fire destroyed a city and demonstrated that mankind possessed the means to destroy itself.

Why do we come to this place, to Hiroshima? We come to ponder a terrible force unleashed in a not-so-distant past. We come to mourn the dead, including over 100,000 Japanese men, women and children, thousands of Koreans, a dozen Americans held prisoner.

Their souls speak to us. They ask us to look inward, to take stock of who we are and what we might become.

It is not the fact of war that sets Hiroshima apart. Artifacts tell us that violent conflict appeared with the very first man. Our early ancestors having learned to make blades from flint and spears from wood used these tools not just for hunting but against their own kind. On every continent, the history of civilization is filled with war, whether driven by scarcity of grain or hunger for gold, compelled by nationalist fervor or religious zeal. Empires have risen and fallen. Peoples have been subjugated and liberated. And at each juncture, innocents have suffered, a countless toll, their names forgotten by time.

The world war that reached its brutal end in Hiroshima and Nagasaki was fought among the wealthiest and most powerful of nations. Their civilizations had given the world great cities and magnificent art. Their thinkers had advanced ideas of justice and harmony and truth. And yet the war grew out of the same base instinct for domination or conquest that had caused conflicts among the simplest tribes, an old pattern amplified by new capabilities and without new constraints.

In the span of a few years, some 60 million people would die. Men, women, children, no different than us. Shot, beaten, marched, bombed, jailed, starved, gassed to death. There are many sites around the world that chronicle this war, memorials that tell stories of courage and heroism, graves and empty camps that echo of unspeakable depravity.

Yet in the image of a mushroom cloud that rose into these skies, we are most starkly reminded of humanity's core contradiction. How the very spark that marks us as a species, our thoughts, our imagination, our language, our toolmaking, our ability to set ourselves apart from nature and bend it to our will — those very things also give us the capacity for unmatched destruction. How often does material advancement or social innovation blind

us to this truth? How easily we learn to justify violence in the name of some higher cause. Every great religion promises a pathway to love and peace and righteousness, and yet no religion has been spared from believers who have claimed their faith as a license to kill. Nations arise telling a story that binds people together in sacrifice and cooperation, allowing for remarkable feats. But those same stories have so often been used to oppress and dehumanize those who are different. Science allows us to communicate across the seas and fly above the clouds, to cure disease and understand the cosmos, but those same discoveries can be turned into ever more efficient killing machines. The wars of the modern age teach us this truth. Hiroshima teaches this truth. Technological progress without an equivalent progress in human institutions can doom us. The scientific revolution that led to the splitting of an atom requires a moral revolution as well.

That is why we come to this place. We stand here in the middle of this city and force ourselves to imagine the moment the bomb fell. We force ourselves to feel the dread of children confused by what they see. We listen to a silent cry. We remember all the innocents killed across the arc of that terrible war and the wars that came before and the wars that would follow. Mere words cannot give voice to such suffering. But we have a shared responsibility to look directly into the eye of history and ask what we must do differently to curb such suffering again. Someday, the voices of the hibakusha will no longer be with us to bear witness. But the memory of the morning of Aug. 6, 1945, must never fade. That memory allows us to fight complacency. It fuels our moral imagination. It allows us to change. And since that fateful day, we have made choices that give us hope. The United States and Japan have forged not only an alliance but a friendship that has won far more for our people than we could ever claim through war. The nations of Europe built a union that replaced battlefields with bonds of commerce and democracy. Oppressed people and nations won liberation. An international community established institutions and treaties that work to avoid war and aspire to restrict and roll back and ultimately eliminate the existence of nuclear weapons.

Still, every act of aggression between nations, every act of terror and corruption and cruelty and oppression that we see around the world shows our work is never done. We may not be able to eliminate man's capacity to do evil, so nations and the alliances that we form must possess the means to defend ourselves. But among those nations like my own that hold nuclear stockpiles, we must have the courage to escape the logic of fear and pursue a world without them. We may not realize this goal in my lifetime, but persistent effort can roll back the possibility of catastrophe. We can chart a course that leads to the destruction of these stockpiles. We can stop the spread to new nations and secure deadly materials from fanatics.

And yet that is not enough. For we see around the world today how even the crudest rifles and barrel bombs can serve up violence on a terrible scale. We must change our mind-set about war itself. To prevent conflict through diplomacy and strive to end conflicts after they've begun. To see our growing interdependence as a cause for peaceful cooperation and not violent competition. To define our nations not by our capacity to destroy but by what we build. And perhaps, above all, we must reimagine our connection to one another as members of one human race.

For this, too, is what makes our species unique. We're not bound by genetic code to repeat the mistakes of the past. We can learn. We can choose. We can tell our children a different story, one that describes a common humanity, one that makes war less likely and cruelty less easily accepted. We see these stories in the hibakusha. The woman who forgave a pilot who flew the plane that dropped the atomic bomb because she recognized that what she really hated was war itself. The man who sought out families of Americans killed here because he believed their loss was equal to his own.

My own nation's story began with simple words: All men are created equal and endowed by our creator with certain unalienable rights including life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Realizing that ideal has never been easy, even within our own borders, even among our own citizens. But staying true to that story is worth the effort. It is an ideal to be strived for, an ideal that extends across continents and across oceans. The irreducible worth of every person, the insistence that every life is precious, the radical and necessary notion that we are part of a single human family — that is the story that we all must tell. That is why we come to Hiroshima. So that we might think of people we love. The first smile from our children in the morning. The gentle touch from a spouse over the kitchen table. The comforting embrace of a parent. We can think of those things and know that those same precious moments took place here, 71 years ago. Those who died, they are like us. Ordinary people understand this, I think. They do not want more war. They would rather that the wonders of science be focused on improving life and not eliminating it. When the choices made by nations, when the choices made by leaders, reflect this simple wisdom, then the lesson of Hiroshima is done.

The world was forever changed here, but today the children of this city will go through their day in peace. What a precious thing that is. It is worth protecting, and then extending to every child. That is a future we can choose, a future in which Hiroshima and Nagasaki are known not as the dawn of atomic warfare but as the start of our own moral awakening.