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THE NECESSITY OF EUPHEMISM

Emile Benveniste may be used to introduce the topic. The French linguist begins an essay on "Euphemisms Ancient and Modern" with a paradox about the early Greek definitions of euphemism. "To speak words which augur well" is one meaning given, but another is "to maintain silence". This initial contradiction is further compounded by yet a third expression, "to shout in triumph". The dilemma is, however, easily dissolved. To speak words which augur well implies, for special occasions, an exhortation even to shout triumphantly, "to assent by an, auspicious outcry"; it further implies, again depending on the circumstances, "to avoid words which augur ill", hence, if necessary, to say nothing. As one definition explains "*avoid all unlucky words* during sacred rites; hence, as the surest mode of avoiding them, *keep a religious silence*" (original emphasis). Paradox terminates; we are merely dealing with "a euphemism for a euphemism" taking an expression of Benveniste out of context.

I am grateful to that author for providing this telling illustration; he is not responsible, however, for how I now exploit it.

Euphemism would certainly be recognized by most people as one of the obvious and quite common applications of metaphor;

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avoiding something potentially unpleasant by substituting one form of expression by another, by inserting a metaphor. The use of disguise; or more neutrally, the taking advantage of language's flexibility for specific purposes. The uses of language, or as faddists of literality would have it, the abuses of language. It is satisfying to discover not mere ambiguity in the original Greek meaning of the word, but patently internal contradictions: to cry out and to be silent. Benveniste explains this in the confusion of *langue* and *parole*—language as the abstract system and language as it is actually used: a coming and going between a "purely linguistic value" and its use-value, which therefore varies with the context of use. But we need to go further. What is in common between speaking words which augur well and avoiding words which augur ill is an exhortation to use words to gain benefit in and of the situation: thus it contains a prohibition—"avoid", "do not use", and an affirmation—"speak", "do use". But you cannot have one without the other: they are created simultaneously, they are the two different yet identical fusions of the same thing. We tend to forget that to do or say something always is, as well, *not* to do or to say something else. We should not have been surprised at the paradox—unless we had acquired some deep-seated suspicion or fear of contradictions as inauspicious, and so euphemistically avoid them, and speak only rationally, one side of the coin at a time. That augurs well for simplicity, augurs ill for comprehension. To gain benefit in the situation is necessarily open-ended; and here the Greek for euphemism illustrates the point with hyperbole: we may cry out triumphantly, or we may maintain a religious silence (it is not only prayer that comes in many forms) or anything between these extremes. Euphemism extravagantly proclaims itself.

Another way of explaining (without explaining away) the contradiction is to appreciate the interplay of means and ends. Silence, one extreme imperative, is the means to the end of avoiding inauspicious language; a triumphant cry, another extreme imperative, is the means to the end of expressing auspicious language. We "naturally" tend to equate means with ends, possibly because we constantly try to distinguish them. Each move is understandable. Yet each time we separate a means from an end, we realize the "endness" of that means; each time we consider ends

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we see them for what they "really" are, only means to other ends. Each analysis forces us to a synthesis, the metonymic equation of the two, which somehow keeps reminding us of its components. A shout in triumph is the end *as much as* the means, we think of it and we treat it accordingly, sometimes. Other times, we disentangle the two, lest we conflate and confuse a silence for a shout, a mean end worth avoiding. Is a shout of silence only an oxymoron? Is it a mental confusion or are we being merely duped by words? Perhaps the latter, because we can consider quite reasonably the reverse relationships: avoidance of inauspicious language as the motivating means to the end of silence, or the utterance of auspicious language as the motivating means to the end of a triumphant cry. Perhaps the cultural sciences can learn from the auspiciousness of the Greek euphemism.

The silence itself has resonance as well. For here we are confronted with an apparently unequivocal absence, a nothing, a negative; yet Greek euphemism rightly saw it as a positive, as a real, tangible phenomenon, as is any word or a shout. It was an intentional gesture urged upon people as much as anything else could be. Yet, once again, the cultural sciences are commonly deaf to such no-things. Gaps apparently are not real, they don't exist; they are, if anything, only the temporal-spatial intermissions between the real, the "features". We have, however, been recently warned about such lacunae of interpretation. Gregory Bateson reminds us that, for example, the letter we *fail* to send our aunt is culturally just as significant as one that we may have sent unexpectedly. That author insists that information, communication, knowledge itself, derive from a "difference that makes a difference" rather than from lumps of hard, material fact. Such an enriched reading of cultural phenomena is consonant with the perspective of Foucault, who is as alert to the anti-history, the non-history, the excluded from history as he is to the thoughts, words and actions that actually take place. That nothing occurs can be very telling. A particular nothing! Likewise, those certain decisions *not* to do anything. Non-decisions can make a difference.

Euphemism displays an intercourse of words, ideas and actions in a variety of positions. Benveniste refers to two. "One process", he says, "consists in endowing an unpropitious notion with a

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propitious name." "But for other ideas", he continues, "there is also a different process by which the expression considered bad is *desacralized* by substituting for it an equivalent which is remote or much weakened." (original emphasis). We can easily think of contemporary examples of both, not least in the arena of the diplomatic vocabulary. Their application in domestic politics is just as constant, yet more readily condoned. And in both, the resort to the extreme forms of euphemism is common. Silence, in particular. Certain politicians are noted for the infrequency of their press interviews; and most try religiously to avoid them during moments of government embarassment. Too frequent a recourse to "no comment" is heard as saying too much. And, of course, on auspicious occasions, the same statesmen shower us with their loquacity. Domestic partners are likewise attuned to comparable stratagems. As well, we all know of the added value, when words fail, of the shout or scream. And it may even be triumphant, in one way or other; at least there is always the therapy of the primal scream.

Silence and the shout, thanks to the Greeks, are apposite reminders of the limits of language; for, of course, both are beyond language. Euphemism, at large, is any human behaviour directed to making better the situation. In place of words we may smile auspiciously; or, depending on circumstances, refrain from smiling, equally auspiciously. And surely our collective actions and our sustained behaviours can likewise be re-read as euphemism. Do we not, for example, avoid situations which augur ill; as we encourage relations, practices and habits which augur well? Nor should we assume that the reward of such motivated behaviour (conscious or otherwise) need be temporally contiguous to our euphemistic efforts. Here, as elsewhere, we frequently postpone our gratifications. Is, perhaps, our overtly gratuitous behaviour "intended" to compensate for some prior inauspicious word or deed? Such gratuity may take many forms: posthumous military awards constituting surely the extreme deferment of euphemism.

The mental operation (conscious or unconscious) behind all euphemism is simple: the creation of compatible yet enhancing metaphors for the purpose of amelioration. To euphemize is to compensate, to counter-balance, either to increase pleasure or to reduce pain. To achieve this one strives not for a consonance or

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harmony between the two or more elements (be they words, ideas, emotions or actions) as the redundancy created by such an equivalence would reinforce rather than alter the message or occasion. Nor does one aim for incongruous metaphors as these may create anxiety, confusion and doubt. Irony would therefore seem inappropriate for euphemistic purposes. What is needed is a metaphoric coupling which qualifies, even challenges the subject of concern. Such a choice of words, behaviour or affect may distance the object, reappraise its connotations, even dare it to appear its opposite (contradictions or negations being invariably conceivable—death, for example, may be deemed happy rather than sad; but hardly hilarious or trivial, both being incongruous). In all cases the choice aims to change the nature of the object to the good for one or both parties involved. The strategy remains constant; particular solutions do not. Language changes for example. A nice reminder of this is provided by the 1964 edition of the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* still being printed in 1978. Its sole illustration of euphemism is the substitution of "mad" by "queer". Today, after anti-psychiatry, we would feel tempted to reverse that substitution!

Greek euphemism recognizes both the autonomy and power of language. Not only does it possess remarkable flexibility and independence; its appropriate usage can alter, for good or bad, that which it accompanies. It pervades and qualifies its social context; it is very much a partner with the more tangible actions, emotions, ideas and human circumstances it conjoins and helps shape. Quite profound implications follow, for example, the outcome of the current debate—struggle—to qualify certain terrorist organisations as either "criminal" or "political". The choice of euphemism may determine future history as well as the writing of the past.

Perhaps partly in recognition of its power, euphemism is often seen as disguise, dishonesty and deception, of others, even of oneself. In some ways this is so. But we must realize that all language is in one sense deceptive. "Language conceals as it reveals" are the often quoted words of Heidegger. Words are never innocent; they are carriers of some particular philosophy, of an entire metaphysics, which Derrida so persistently demonstrates. Nor transparent, as they carry traces of their forgotten history and of their relations with the entire language system. Their meanings

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are always sliding elsewhere; they are allusive and elusive. Further disguise may result, of course, from either conscious intention to mislead, or from an unconscious motivation to distort and hide. Freud abundantly illustrates the complex operations of the latter. But perhaps a danger, even error, exists in this emphasis on the deceptions of euphemism. It implies that a correction can be made; that we can, and often should, return to the literal. Distortion suggests some movement away from an accurate or true presentation, to which one may return with the requisite degree of honesty, truth, objectivity, knowledge, self-awareness. In other words, the accusation implies some hidden or lost standard which can be found or formulated, which ought more often than not be aimed for; and which, with some application of rigour, intellectual or therapeutic, can be recovered. That there is somewhere, attainable, a *neutral* description of things; that words, ideas, emotions, circumstances can be fitted together with congruence, with an accurate identity of match, without one feature in any way qualifying the integrity of the others. Truth is mirroring, is redundancy, is description without elaboration. Perfect correspondence. Duplication. A window transparent. No artefact. No artifice.

Have we a paradox here? To talk of the distortion in euphemism requires a notion of the non-euphemistic which is surely unrealizable; any description of, or addition to, an idea or event adds to it, qualifies, distorts it. Even redundancy adds just that—an over-emphasis; any commentary distorts by the incorporation of its own comment. Is not the non-euphemistic already some form of euphemism? Are we not again dealing with euphemisms of euphemisms? Is it not time to begin referring to the truth of euphemisms? And, as with any truth, it is a particular perspective, and thereby is false as well. Euphemism has no special privilege, but neither has it any particular impropriety. It transgresses, it does violence; but it could remind us that such is always at stake each time we speak or act.

But perhaps there is something significant about Greek euphemism. Could we say that its two extreme manifestations, the religious silence and the triumphant shout, manifest something special, symbolic, over and above their euphemicity? They are concentrated signs. Not so much over-determined as over-loaded;

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they are hyperbolic euphemisms. They have taken the dicta "to avoid words which augur ill" and "to speak words which augur well" and expressed them at the edge of, or beyond, words. The silence sacrifices language itself in its disavowal of inauspicious words; the shout supplements and extends language in its quest for the most auspicious words. Words very much become deeds; the actions are symbols of complete dedication, of over-fulfilment. And in a way, these opposites become powerfully fused as the most conceivable manifestations, the limits, of auspicious euphemism. Compared to any verbal forms they display a difference that makes a difference; but, of course, only within this context. It is this that allows them to acquire their particular value. Without this we would have a "mere" silence or shout, or another silence or shout. With the euphemistic silence or shout have we isolated something we could be tempted to call symbolic?

Symbolic of the human need to overcome. Of mankind's immanent drive to shape his reality more to his suiting. In the face of circumstances seemingly given and beyond him, to intercede on his own behalf; to reduce pain, to increase pleasure. No matter how restrained by events, he "naturally" attempts to exploit the moment, to act independently of other determinations. It is as if, at some profound psychic level, he has faith in the efficacy of his words, his gestures, his Five Year Plans, to change things. And it would seem that irrespective of result, he perseveres. As if this compulsion and ability to euphemize compensate for a world otherwise out of hand. A wry deception?

The necessity of euphemism ultimately symbolizes a paradox. Humankind is driven to be creative. It seems determined.

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Reference: E. Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, M.E.Meek (trans.) University of Miami Press, 1971