The Use of Euphemisms as the Highest Form of Doublespeak in American Presidential Debates

Mgr. Pavel Reich
Masaryk University, Brno

Outline

- Basic units of lexical doublespeak – purr and snarl words, hidden bias

- Euphemisms

- Results of the research

Definition of Doublespeak

- Doublespeak is language that pretends to communicate but really doesn't. It is language that makes the bad seem good, the negative appear positive, the unpleasant appear attractive or at least tolerable. Doublespeak is language that avoids or shifts responsibility, language that is at variance with its real or purported meaning. It is language which conceals or prevents thought; rather than extending thought, doublespeak limits it. (Lutz 1990: 1)

Hidden Bias

Words can imply a positive or a negative attitude and evaluate reality in a particular way, and thus manipulate people's perception of reality (Bolinger 1980: 76)

- **Adjectives –** *Young (and handsome, attractive, inexperienced), Extreme (absurd, dangerous)*

- **Nouns** – *Reformer (progressive, efficient), Dictator (brutal, ruthless, cruel)*

- **Verbs –** succeed x fail, win x lose, build x destroy

Purr and Snarl Words

Words whose conceptual meaning becomes irrelevant because whoever is using them is simply capitalizing on their unfavourable connotations in order to give forceful expression to his own hostility. Terms for extreme political views, such as *communist* or *fascist*, are particularly prone to degenerate into snarl words (Leech 1990: 44).

1. Social groupings, e.g. nationality words or religious sects
2. Words referring to political ideas or movements
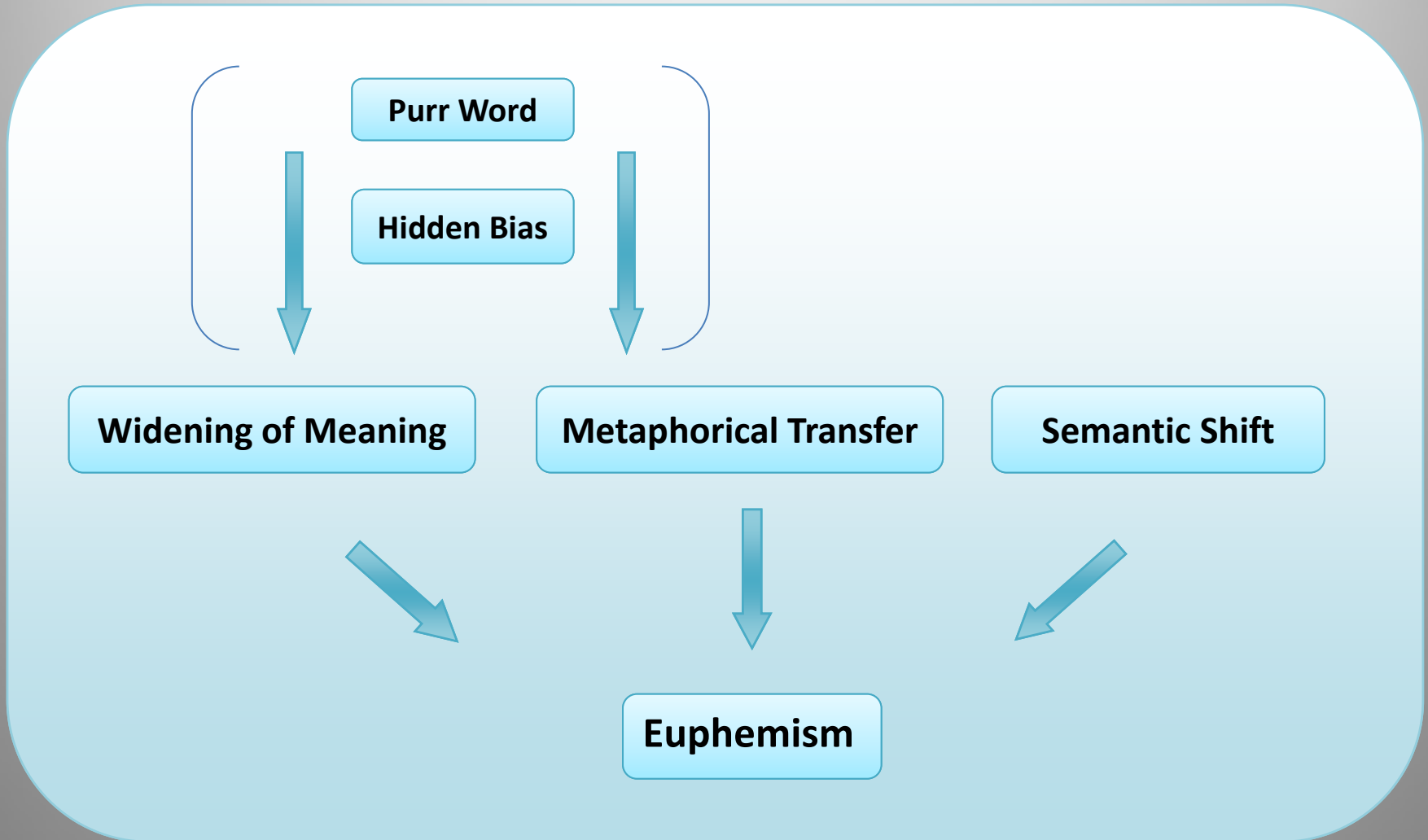3. Emotionally loaded words

Euphemism

- Euphemism is the practice of referring to something offensive or indelicate in terms that make it sound more pleasant or becoming than it really is. (Leech 1990: 45)

- widening of meaning
- borrowing words from other languages (Greek or Latin)
- semantic shift (metonymy, synecdoche)
- metaphorical transfer
- phonetic distortions

Analysis – Corpus and Aims

- Televised presidential debates before American presidential elections in 2000, 2004 and 2008

- How euphemisms are used and how they are created

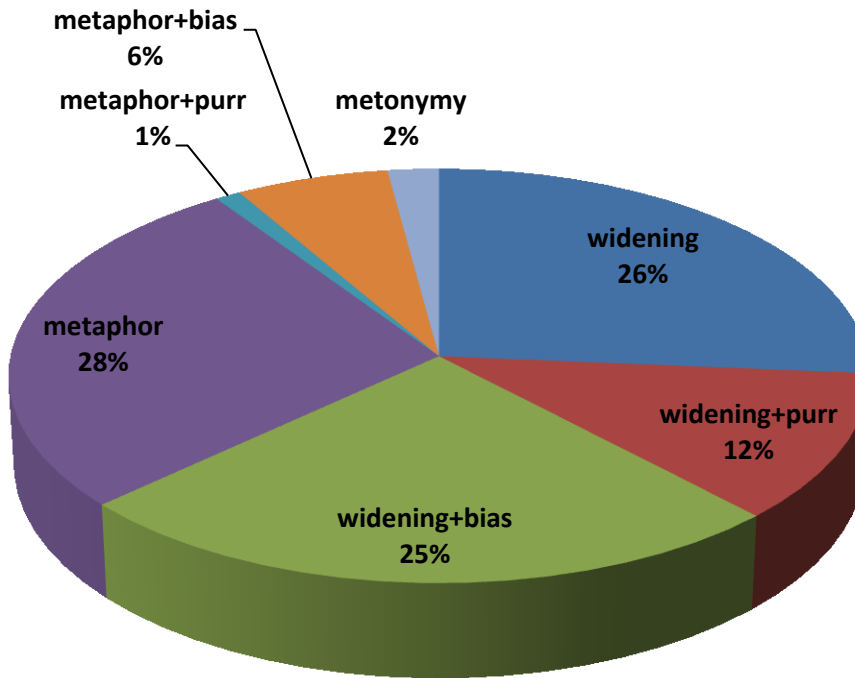- Comparison of Democratic and Republican candidates

Creation of Euphemisms

Purr Word

Hidden Bias

Widening of Meaning

Metaphorical Transfer

Semantic Shift

Euphemism

Examples

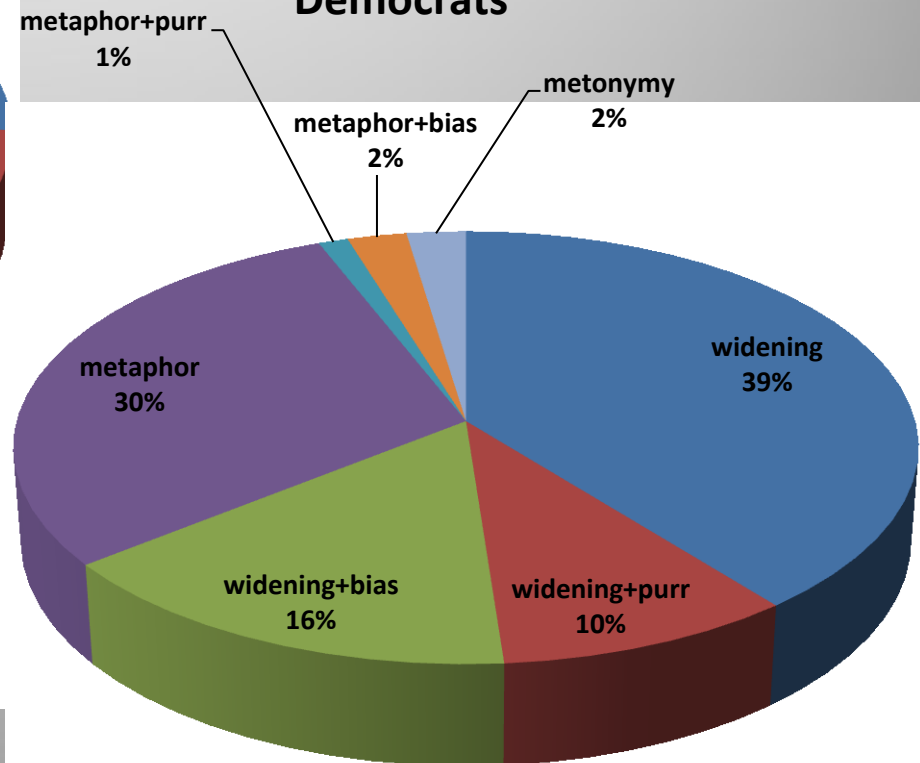| widening	those who believe in choice, use of military power, lower income groups
widening + purr	peacemakers, peacekeepers, freedom fighters
widening + bias	to be fortunate enough to earn your vote, developing world, hard working people who pay the bills
metaphor	people at the bottom end of the economic ladder, people left behind, those at the top
metaphor + purr	fledgling democracies
metaphor + bias	nation building (missions), a child can walk in and have their heart turned dark
semantic shift	Washington, Wall Street

Results

	2000		2004		2008	
	Bush	**Gore**	**Bush**	**Kerry**	**McCain**	**Obama**
widening	3	6	13	16	9	11
widening+purr	2	0	1	3	8	5
widening+bias	10	5	9	4	5	4
metaphor	9	6	13	12	4	7
metaphor+purr	0	0	0	0	1	1
metaphor+bias	5	1	0	0	1	1
metonymy	0	0	0	0	2	2
total	**29**	**18**	**36**	**35**	**30**	**31**

Results

Conclusion

- Widening of meaning and metaphor the most common way of creating euphemisms
- Widening of meaning itself and when supported by purr words or hidden bias constitutes 63% (Republicans) and 65% (Democrats) of euphemisms
- Metaphor supported by hidden bias or purr words only exceptionally
- No major differences in the creation of euphemisms between Republicans and Democrats

Bibliography

- Beard, A. (2000) *The Language of Politics*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Bolinger, Dwight. Language – The Loaded Weapon. Longman: London, 1980.
- Leech, Geoffrey. Semantics. Penguin Books: London, 1990.
- Lutz, William. Doublespeak Defined. HarperCollins: New York, 1999.
- Lutz, William. Doublespeak: From "Revenue Enhancement" to "Terminal Living". How Government, Business, Advertisers, and Others Use Language to Deceive You. HarperPerennial: New York, 1990.
- Orwell, George. Nineteen Eighty-Four. Pinguin Books: London, 1989.
- Sears, Donald A., and Dwight Bolinger. Aspects of Language. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: Fort Worth, 1981.
- Stubbs, M. Text and Corpus Analysis: Computer-assisted Studies of Language and Culture. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1996.
- Williams, J. (1957) *Origins of the English Language.* New York: Free Press.

- Woolley, J.T. and Peters, G. *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA. Available from World Wide Web: http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=78691.
- Woolley, J.T. and Peters, G. *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA. Available from World Wide Web: http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=84482.
- Woolley, J.T. and Peters, G. *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Santa Barbara, CA. Available from World Wide Web: http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=84526.