

# **A Cognitive Analysis of Euphemism in Trump's Political Speeches**

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## **Abstract**

Euphemism plays the role of coordinating and maintaining interpersonal relations in the process of social communication and permeates into all levels of society. The fate of politicians is largely related to the support of voters, so politicians pay great attention to their wording in public. Based on conceptual metaphor and conceptual metonymy theory in cognitive linguistics, this thesis collects Trump's political speeches from 2018 to 2019. Through research, this paper has the following findings: Firstly, the euphemisms appearing in Trump's political speeches can be explained by conceptual metaphor and conceptual metonymy. There is no significant difference between euphemisms formed by conceptual metaphor and euphemisms formed by conceptual metonymy in Trump's political speeches. Secondly, four themes of euphemisms frequently appearing in Trump's political speeches, which are about war, death, poor people and uncompleted political goals. Finally, there are three intentions of using euphemisms in Trump's political speeches: the intention of evasion, concealment and courtesy.

**Keywords:** euphemism; political speech; conceptual metaphor; conceptual metonymy; cognitive linguistics

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Euphemism is a common phenomenon in the process of language use. It plays an irreplaceable role in interpersonal communication. When people use language to communicate, they usually express themselves directly. But when it comes to certain topics or the use of certain words, people might prefer to avoid using unpleasant or hurtful language. Avoiding does not mean not talking about it. In order to achieve the purpose of communication, people use some vague or polite words instead of unpleasant ones. Therefore, a large number of euphemisms have been employed in these circumstances.

Euphemism is a mirror reflecting social life, which keeps spreading with the inheritance of culture and daily use. It also constantly innovates and develops with the changes of the times and thoughts. Consequently, scholars at home and abroad have never stopped studying euphemism. Scholars mainly study euphemism from the perspectives of stylistic rhetoric, social psychology, culture and pragmatic effects. In recent years, many scholars have tried to explain the construction mechanism of euphemism from the perspective of human psychological intuition. However, due to the absence of convincing theories, little progress has been made in the interpretation of euphemism mechanism. Because euphemism involves people's cognitive processing of language, the construction mechanism of euphemism can not be understood without cognition. Cognitive linguistics provides theoretical tools and a new perspective for revealing the mechanism of euphemism. Therefore, this paper studies euphemism in Trump's political speeches from the cognitive perspective. In previous studies, researches on euphemism in Trump's political speeches were few. There are only several papers and journals related to the study of euphemisms used in Obama's speeches and most of them studied the euphemism from the perspective of pragmatic. This paper applies conceptual metaphor theory and conceptual metonymy theory in cognitive linguistics to better illustrate the process of constructing euphemism in political speeches.

## **II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Lakoff believes that cognitive model is a cognitive way based on the interaction between human and external world, including propositional pattern, image schema pattern, metaphor pattern and metonymy pattern. Obviously, the latter two are the main mechanisms of euphemism generation. The interpretation of the cognitive process of metaphor and metonymy by the ideal cognitive model can help us better understand the construction principle of euphemism. The construction of metaphor or metonymy in euphemism includes two semantic systems: surface (explicit) and deep (implicit). Surface language is a relatively prominent euphemism after twists and turns of thinking, which is the source meaning. The deep language is the taboo meaning, which is the target meaning. Tortuousness refers to concealment, and is explained by means of metaphor and metonymy. As the vehicle, the source meaning can activate the target meaning so as to highlight the target meaning. Therefore, this paper selects conceptual metaphor and conceptual metonymy in cognitive linguistics as the theoretical basis to analyze euphemism in Trump's political speeches.

## 2.1 Conceptual Metaphor

The idea of conceptual metaphor was first put forward in Lakoff & Johnson's book *Metaphors We Live By*. Conceptual metaphor theory held that metaphor is a systematic mapping from a specific conceptual domain to an abstract conceptual domain. Metaphor is a way of thinking and cognitive means. George Lakoff & Mark Johnson divided the conceptual metaphor into three categories in this book from a cognitive perspective: structural metaphor, ontological metaphor, and orientational metaphor.

### 2.1.1 Structural Metaphor

Structural metaphor refers to the construction of another concept through one concept. The cognitive domains of the two concepts are naturally different, but their structures remain unchanged, that is to say, there is a regular corresponding relationship between their respective. For example, "time is money", in which "time" and "money" are two concepts, and we map the structure of the source domain "money" to the target domain "time". A feature in the former corresponds to a feature in the latter.

### 2.1.2 Ontological Metaphor

Our experience of physical objects and substances provides a further basis for understanding. Understanding our experiences in terms of objects and substances allows us to pick out parts of our experience and treat them as discrete entities or substances of a uniform kind. Once we can identify our experiences as entities or substances, we can refer to them, categorize them, group them, and quantify them (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p.26). Take inflation as an example. We treat the experience of rising prices as entity, and form the ontological metaphor:

INFLATION IS AN ENTITY

- a. *Inflation is lowering our standard of living.*
- b. *If there's much more inflation, we'll never survive. We need to combat inflation.*

### 2.1.3 Orientational Metaphor

Orientational metaphor is a kind of metaphorical concept. It does not structure one concept in terms of another but instead organizes a whole system of concepts with respect to one another (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p.15). It is spatial schema that maps abstracts concepts in target domain onto concrete orientational concepts in source domain. Spatial orientations: up-down, in-out, front-back, on-off, deep-shallow, central-peripheral are always used in orientational metaphor.

Such metaphorical orientations are not arbitrary. They have a basis in our physical and cultural experience. Though the polar oppositions up-down, in-out, etc., are physical in nature, the orientational metaphors based on them can vary from culture to culture. For example, in some cultures the future is in front of us, whereas in others it is in back.

## **2.2 Conceptual Metonymy**

Metonymy used to be regarded as a figure of speech on the linguistic level. But since the 1980s, metonymy has been regarded by cognitive linguists as a psychological mechanism that forms the basis of many human concepts. The essential feature of metonymy is that it uses the relatedness or contiguity of things to construct alternative relationships between things.

Kovecses, Z & Radden, G divided the metonymy into two categories: the metonymy between the whole and the part and the metonymy between the different parts of the whole, according to the relationship between metonymy and metonymy target in idealized cognitive model.

The metonymy between the whole and the part includes the following seven subcategories: Thing-and-Part ICM, Scale ICM, Constitute ICM, Event ICM, Category-and-Member ICM, Category-and-Property ICM and Reduction ICM. Metonymy between different parts of the whole consists of the following ten categories: Action ICM, Perception ICM, Causation ICM, Production ICM, Control ICM, Possession ICM, Container ICM, Location ICM, Sign and Reference ICM and Modification ICM.

## **III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to explore Trump's political intentions of using euphemisms from a cognitive perspective. In order to help readers have a better understanding of the euphemisms in President's speeches, the author tries to find the answers to the following two questions under the theoretical framework of conceptual metaphor and conceptual metonymy.

1. From the cognitive perspective, what are the distribution characteristics of euphemisms in Trump's political speeches?
  - 1) In the classification of conceptual metaphor, what are the distribution characteristics of euphemisms in political speeches?
  - 2) In the classification of conceptual metonymy, what are the distribution characteristics of euphemisms in political speeches?
2. What are the underlying intentions behind the euphemisms used in the speeches?

### **3.2 Data Collection**

This study selects 30 Trump's political speeches as research subjects, whose words amount around 87700 in total. All the speeches are collected from the website of The White House (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/>). The White House is the official website of the White House, which publishes news, cabinet appointments, and major speeches, including biographies, videos, and photos. In order to acquire the latest understanding of euphemisms used in Trump's speeches, this thesis selects 30 political speeches in 2018-2019 at random as the original corpus.

### 3.3 Research Procedures

The research procedures of this paper are shown as follows:

Firstly, euphemisms in political speeches are sorted out according to the construction principles of "distance and relevance" proposed by Shao Junhang (2004). Secondly, euphemisms are classified according to the classification of conceptual metaphor proposed by Lakoff & Johnson(1980) and classification of conceptual metonymy proposed by Radde & Kovecses. The corpus software Antconc is used for the statistics. Then, the study will obtain the required data. After that, the author will summarize distribution characteristics of euphemisms, and conduct quantitative analysis. Thirdly, qualitative analysis of data carried out by combining conceptual metaphor and conceptual metonymy to explore the causes of such distribution characteristics. At last, the author studies the distribution characteristics of euphemisms to conduct a qualitative analysis of euphemisms used in Trump's political speeches, and explore Trump's political intentions of using euphemisms from a cognitive perspective.

## IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Analysis of Euphemisms from Cognitive Perspective

In this chapter, the author explains the euphemisms in Trump's speeches under the guidance of the conceptual metaphor and conceptual metonymy from cognitive perspective. The distribution characteristics of euphemisms in political speeches will be presented with some tables and figures in the following sections.

According to the construction principles of "distance and relevance", 132 euphemisms are collected from the 30 Trump's political speeches in 2018-2019. On the basis of the previous theories presented and the data collected, the distribution of euphemisms used in the Trump's political speeches is shown in the following table.

**Table 4.1 The Classification of Euphemisms in Trump's Speeches**

Classifications		Number of data		Percentage
Conceptual metaphor	Structural metaphor	33	68	25%
	Ontological metaphor	28		21%
	Oriental metaphor	7		5%
Conceptual metonymy	Whole-part metonymy	52	64	40%
	Part-part metonymy	12		9%
Total		132		100%

We can see from the Table 4.1, among the categories of conceptual metaphor, there are 33 euphemisms formed by the structural metaphor, accounting for 25% of the total, 28 euphemisms constructed by the ontological metaphor, accounting for 21% of the total, and 7 euphemisms formed by the orientational metaphor, accounting for 5% of the total. In the classification of conceptual metonymy, there are 52 euphemisms constructed by the whole-part metonymy, accounting for 40% of the total, and 12 euphemisms formed by the whole-part metonymy, accounting for 9% of the total. It is clearly shown

that the total number of euphemisms formed by the conceptual metaphor is 68 and the total number of euphemisms constructed by conceptual metonymy is 64, which represents the occurrences of euphemisms formed by conceptual metaphor is a little more than euphemisms formed by conceptual metonymy.

#### 4.1.1 Analysis of Euphemisms by Conceptual Metaphor Theory

In this section, the author attempts to conduct a detailed metaphorical analysis on euphemisms used in the Trump's speeches by means of conceptual metaphor theory proposed by Lakoff & Johnson (1980). They divided conceptual metaphor into three categories: structural metaphor, ontological metaphor and orientational metaphor. A series of the dominant conceptual metaphors on euphemisms will be presented firstly in this part. Then, a specific review of these metaphorical expressions will be extracted from Trump's speeches. Finally, a detailed qualitative analysis of these metaphorical expressions will be illustrated one by one. In the following section, a further classification and discussion will be elaborated.

##### 4.1.1.1 Structural Metaphor of Euphemisms

In the above chapter three, we mentioned that the structural metaphor refers to the understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another. We can map the structure of the source domain to the target domain. A feature in the source domain corresponds to a feature in the target domain. Therefore, a series of euphemisms are formed by structural metaphor. In the Trump's political speeches, there are three main structural metaphors: journey metaphor, war metaphor and building metaphor. And these three types will be further illustrated in the following Table 4.2.

**Table 4.2 Structural Metaphor of Euphemisms**

Categorization	Number	Percentage	Structural Metaphor
Journey metaphor	10	30%	The Pursuit of American Dream is a Journey
			Economy Development is a Journey
			National Development is a Journey
			Reach the Highest Peaks
War metaphor	17	51%	Terrorism is an Enemy
			Brutal Regime is an Enemy
			Unfair Trade Deal is an Enemy
			Criminal Gang is an Enemy
			Human Trafficking is an Enemy
			Socialism is an Enemy
Building metaphor	6	19%	Country is a Building
			Society is a Building
			World is a Building

As is shown in Table 4.2, the war metaphor accounts for the most percentage with a number of 17 euphemistic expressions and 51 percent, while the building metaphor accounts for the least percentage with a number of 6 euphemistic expressions and 19 percent.

#### 4.1.1.2 Ontological Metaphor of Euphemisms

Ontological metaphor is one of the conceptual metaphor according to the classification proposed by Lakoff & Johnson. Ontological metaphor allows us to understand the abstract things based on the personal experience and physical substances in nature. In the Trump's speeches, there are two sub-categories of ontological metaphors: human metaphor and entity metaphor. And these two types of metaphor will be further elaborated in the following Table 4.3.

**Table 4.3 Ontological Metaphor of Euphemisms**

Categorization	Number	Percentage	Structural Metaphor
Human metaphor	13	46%	Nation is a Person
			Company is a Person
			Tax Bill is a Person
			The Crime and The Drug are Person
			A New Version is a Person
			American Economy is a Person
Entity metaphor	15	54%	News is an Entity
			Dream is an Entity
			Poverty is an Entity
			Business Confidence is an Entity
			American Spirit is an Entity
			Passion is an Entity

We can see from the Table 4.3 that there are two types of metaphor in Trump's speeches. One of the ontological metaphor is human metaphor with a number of 13 euphemistic expressions collected and accounts for 46%. The other is entity metaphor with a number of 15 euphemistic expressions collected and accounts for 54%.

#### 4.1.1.3 Orientational Metaphor of Euphemisms

Orientational metaphor is one of the categories of conceptual metaphor. It is spatial schema that maps abstracts concepts in target domain onto concrete orientational concepts in source domain based on the human experience. Spatial orientations: up-down, in-out, front-back, on-off, deep-shallow, central-peripheral are always used in orientational metaphor. In the daily life, we often project different kinds of orientational words onto abstract objects such as emotions, social development and physical condition. In the selected Trump's speeches, the most typical ones of mappings are Satisfied is Up/ Disappointment is Down, Economic Development is up/ Economic Crisis is Down, Promotion is Up/ Demotion is Down, Prosperity is Up/ Destruction is Down. In the speech, Trump applies some orientation words to replace some words that express the mood and social status, which not only conveys his intentions to the audience well, but also achieves euphemistic effects and makes the



audience easy to accept. The main examples selected from the speeches are shown as below:

(1) *Nothing will keep this incredible nation of ours down. Nothing will stop us from the reaching the highest peaks.*

In this example, the orientational word “down” represents the destruction of the country. In order to prevent the word "destruction" from causing psychological panic to the audience, Trump cleverly uses the euphemistic expression, not only conveys the original intention but also makes the audience feel comfortable.

(2) *I will fight for you with every breath in my body and I will never let you down.*

(3) *I will never let you down. I can say that.*

These are two typical example of Satisfied is Up/ Disappointment is Down. In Trump's speech, there is often a commitment to the people. In order to gain popular support, he must use a positive language to describe these commitments. So he uses "down" instead of "disappointment" to obtain euphemistic effects.

(4) Ken joined H&K 14 years ago as a mechanic and worked his way up to become a project foreman.

In this case, the orientational word “up” represents the promotion. The implication of this sentence is that Ken was promoted from a mechanic to a project foreman after he joined H&K 14 years ago.

#### 4.1.2 Analysis of Euphemisms by Conceptual Metonymy Theory

As mentioned above, the essential feature of metonymy is that it constructs alternative relationships between things according to the relatedness or contiguity of things. The conceptual metonymy theory will be applied to conduct a detailed analysis on euphemisms used in the Trump’s speeches. Kovecses, Z & Radden, G divided the metonymy into two categories: Whole-Part ICM and Part-Part ICM, each of which can also be further divided into several sub-categories. The classifications of euphemisms used in Trump’s speeches are in the light of the two categories of conceptual metonymy. In this section, a number of the dominant conceptual metonymies on euphemisms will be presented in this part.

##### 4.1.2.1 Whole-Part Metonymy of Euphemisms

The metonymy between the whole and the part can be divided into 7 sub-categories. The euphemisms that appear in Trump’s speeches are formed by four types of metonymies: thing-and-part metonymy, event metonymy, category-and-property metonymy and category-and-member metonymy. And these four types of metonymy will be further elaborated in the following Table 4.4.

**Table 4.4 Whole-Part Metonymy of Euphemisms**

Categorization	Number	Percentage
Thing-and-part metonymy	13	25%
Constitute metonymy	8	15%
Category-and-property metonymy	25	48%
Category-and-member metonymy	6	12%



As can be seen from the table above, there are four sub-categories in the classification of euphemisms in whole-part metonymy, in which category-and-property metonymy accounts for the most percentage with the number of 25 euphemistic expressions and 48%. Thing-and-part metonymy accounts for the second largest percentage with the number of 13 euphemistic expressions and 25%. Event metonymy occupies the percentage of 15, with the number of 8 euphemistic expressions and category-and-member metonymy occupies the percentage of 12, with the number of 6 euphemistic expressions.

#### 4.1.2.2 Part-Part Metonymy of Euphemisms

It can be seen from the chapter three, there are 9 sub-categories included in the part-part metonymy. In Trump's political speeches, the appeared euphemisms are formed by three types of metonymy: action metonymy, causation metonymy and location metonymy. The following table 4.5 shows the number of three types of metonymy appeared in Trump's speeches.

**Table 4.5 Whole-Part Metonymy of Euphemisms**

Categorization	Number	Percentage
Action metonymy	7	58%
Causation metonymy	3	25%
Location metonymy	2	17%

From the table above, we can find that there are three sub-categories in the classification of euphemisms in part-part metonymy, in which action metonymy accounts for the most percentage with the number of 7 euphemistic expressions and 58%. The following is causation metonymy, there are 3 euphemistic expressions in this kind of metonymy. Location metonymy accounts for the least percentage with the number of 2 euphemistic expressions and 17%.

#### 4.2 Analysis of the Underlying Intentions behind the Euphemisms

As the President of the United States, Trump's speeches not only represent his own views but also the standpoint of the United States, so he often uses euphemisms to express his political ideas. In his speeches, Trump often uses euphemisms to alleviate conflicts between different social classes and different interest groups. In order to convince people to accept his policies and gain the support of a large number of voters, he avoids using words that would stimulate or hurt the feelings of certain social groups and minimizes the seriousness of economic tensions by blurring his words. The intentions of using euphemism in Trump's speech is to cover up the truth, ease contradictions, and gain support from public at home and abroad. In the following, this study will combine examples to analyze Trump's intentions of using euphemism in political speeches in detail.

##### 4.2.1 The Intention of Evasion

In Trump's speeches, different euphemisms are often used to replace words that people tend to

resist, such as war and death. The direct use of these words often causes discomfort to the listener, but they have to be mentioned in order to express certain political views. At this moment, the importance of euphemisms is reflected.

War is a fertile ground for euphemism. When talking about war, people tend to show their fear and aversion to war. In order to appease the public anti-war sentiment and hide the ferocious face of war, the authorities who intend to launch war often use euphemism to replace war vocabulary. The use of such euphemisms that distort the truth and literally removes the horror and cruelty of war. In Trump's speech, he often replaces the war vocabulary with euphemisms constructed by metonymy. He uses verbs such as "fight", "struggle" and "battle" as a euphemism to take the place of word "war". It not only plays a role in motivating people, but also makes people ignore the bloody scenes in the war, so as not to arouse the aversion of the audience.

Death is a taboo word in any country. People have a deep fear of death because it represents the terra incognita. And death also means a permanent separation from loved ones or heroes, so everyone feels sad when the word "death" is mentioned. Therefore, in political speeches, in order to take care of the public's emotions and to show respect for the deceased heroes, speakers would use euphemisms of death instead of use the word "death" or "die" directly. In Trump's speeches, euphemisms were constructed by metaphor to mediately expressed "death", such as "perish", "pass away", "lost", "fallen" and so on.

Therefore, in Trump's speeches, euphemisms are used to avoid directly talking about some topics that may cause displeasure to the public.

#### **4.2.2 The Intention of Concealment**

In Trump's speeches, euphemisms are often used to disguise the ineffectiveness of government and the futility of policy. In the US presidential campaign, candidates often try to win voters' support by planning for a better society and advertising the benefits of their new policies. After being elected President, trump has actively implemented his new policies, but some political goals have not been achieved. Therefore, when talking about these uncompleted political goals or serious social problems to the public, he uses journey metaphor to construct different euphemisms. The use of euphemisms instead of direct expression of undone goals serves to disguise the incompetence of himself and the government and to placate the public. Encouraging people and telling them that we are on the way forward, and if we work together we can solve problems and achieve our goals.

Using euphemisms in this way can not only whitewash sensitive political issues, but also inspire the public and get support from the public, which is a consistent political means of politicians.

#### **4.2.3 The Intention of Courtesy**

The United States has always been regarded as an economic power, but in recent years, the United States' fiscal deficit has only increased since Trump took office, and the people are living in dire straits. The American dream has always been a promising prospect for the people of the United States, but the reality is that there are still many poor people who are not on the road to the American dream. Therefore,

Trump attaches great importance to poverty alleviation and repeatedly mentions the need to solve this problem in his speeches, so he would inevitably refer to the word "poor" in his speeches. However, in order to avoid the embarrassment and inferiority of poor people and to show respect for them, Trump constructs relevant euphemisms by metonymy to replace the direct expression of poor people. In his speeches, euphemistic phrases like "hardworking, low-income families", "forgotten men and women", "vulnerable communities", "needy, the struggling, and the underprivileged", "struggling people" and so on are used to replace the direct expression of the word "the poor".

In Trump's speeches, the use of euphemisms about the poor can not only show trump's courtesy to the poor, but also maintain the self-esteem of the poor group, in order to make his speeches decent and to win public supports.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

This thesis collects, classifies, and analyzes the euphemisms in Trump's political speeches, and studies the euphemisms usage intentions in Trump's political speeches. The following are the major findings of the study:

Firstly, the euphemisms that appear in Trump's political speeches are formed by conceptual metaphor and conceptual metonymy. According to statistics, in Trump's political speeches, euphemisms formed by conceptual metaphor are slightly more than euphemisms constructed by conceptual metonymy. Secondly, In Trump's political speeches, there are four kinds of euphemisms that appear frequently, including euphemisms for death, euphemisms for war, euphemisms for unresolved social problems and sensitive topics, and euphemisms for the poor. Last but not least, this study finds that there are three underlying intentions behind the euphemisms used in Trump's political speeches: the intention of evasion, the intention of concealment and the intention of courtesy. All in all, euphemisms play an important role in Trump's political speeches. When a derogatory or negative word is replaced by a euphemism, it often becomes a positive word. The use of euphemisms not only maintains the good image and interpersonal relationship of the government, but also enables Trump to gain the support of the public.

Although the author has devoted a lot of time and energy to this research, there are still some limitations in this research. The number of euphemisms collected from these 30 political speeches is relatively small, so the author cannot claim that the findings of this study can represent the use of euphemisms in all political speeches. Therefore, the research materials need to be expanded in further research.

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