

Euphemisms and Idioms Cropping up in Business Rhetoric

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Abstract

A careful understanding of the linguistic aspects of business interactions has to do with a good knowledge of euphemistic and idiomatic expressions which often crop up in corporate communication. The paper is designed with two purposes in mind.

First, it attempts to provide an analysis of numerous verbal softeners (euphemisms) in terms of length, structure, and function, with important implications for business vocabulary expansion.

Second, it aims to classify native language idioms and set phrases according to the area of usage. Thus, the outcome of my research is to enhance familiarity with informal, nonstandard forms of communication focused on contextual business factors and offer more flexibility in unblocking miscommunication.

The results indicate that gaining an insight into the meanings of euphemisms and idioms can enable interlocutors to use them accurately in respective business settings.

Key words: areas of usage, corporate rhetoric, euphemisms, idioms, language

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1. Introduction

By using the phrase *language behaviour* to refer to the choice of language that each of us has when the occasion demands, we can switch varieties according to the field of discourse, medium, or attitude.

A discussion of politeness and impoliteness leads to the motivations for preferring orthophemisms, euphemisms, or dysphemisms in everyday language, in general, and in business language, in particular. As Allan and Burridge (2006) argue, language expressions are constantly subject to censoring and taboo, suggesting that cross-varietal synonymy should predominate in examining the effects on language: "Discussion of taboo and the censoring of language naturally leads to a consideration of politeness and impoliteness, and their interaction with euphemism (sweet talking), dysphemism (speaking offensively) and orthophemism (straight talking). The term *euphemism* is well known; but its counterpart *dysphemism* rarely appears in ordinary language. *Orthophemism* is a term we have coined in order to account for direct or neutral expressions that are not sweet-sounding, evasive or overly polite (euphemistic), nor harsh, blunt or offensive (dysphemistic) [...] Important to this discussion is the concept of *cross-varietal synonymy*, i.e. words that have the same meaning as other words used in different contexts" (Allan and Burridge, 2006, p.29).

Moreover, corporate rhetoric makes extensive use of imagistic metaphors, idiomatic expressions which powerfully step in almost everything we do: setting up a business, selling products, negotiating contracts, making decisions, implementing changes, or taking new opportunities. Making an effort to learn our business counterpart's language widely helps us begin to think from their perspective and grasp the meaning of certain words.

Thus, the focus will be on the linguistic analysis of certain bland expressions based on the understanding of and familiarization with the prevailing value systems of particular speech communities and the culture-specific metaphors whose multiple meanings can be troublesome when communicating in a new business environment.

2. Literature review

One set of lexical items which traces back to the principle of politeness (Lakoff, 1973; Grice, 1975; Brown and Levinson, 1987; Leech, 2005, 2007, 2014) and indirectness is represented by euphemisms.

Whether *glittering generalities*, *purr words* (Mills, 2000), *inoffensive expressions* (Chaney and Martin, 2007), *sweet talking* (Allan and Burridge, 2006), or *the stealth bombers of rhetoric* (Krogerus and Tschäppeler, 2018), *euphemisms* are the ace we have up our sleeve to fight against verbal taboos and other categories of offensive language (swearing, insults, derogatory comments). The existing vocabulary of nasty things is refreshed with new expressions whose figurative meanings decontaminate the common perception (referential meaning) of the denotata. They are sensitive to factors like social standing, the relations between speakers, the topics for discussion, the setting, or, to put it differently, they are context, place and time dependent. At the same time, they are vague, indirect expressions that sound good to the listener or, as Neaman and Silver put it "substituting an inoffensive or pleasant term for a more explicit, offensive one, thereby veneering the truth by using kinds words" (Neaman and Silver, 1990, p.4). Others are of the opinion that euphemisms obfuscate language: "Euphemisms are the stealth bombers of rhetoric. At first glance they are not visible, but their attacks are insidious: by the time you become aware of them, the damage is already done" (Krogerus and Tschäppeler, 2018, p.166).

As far as the spectrum of idiomacity and the areas of usage are concerned, Cooper's (1998) perspective is more oriented towards the difficulty level of idioms which he classifies into three groups, i.e. *frozen idioms*, *transparent idioms*, and *opaque idioms*, insisting on the connection between the literal and figurative meanings of the expression: "the linguistic characteristics of idioms, such as the degree of syntactic flexibility and the closeness between literal and figurative meanings, affect the ease with which they can be acquired" (Cooper, 1998, p.257).

In the same line of approach, Maalej (2005) posits the question of cultural background, considering that idioms and metaphors conjure up a language which is specific within a given culture: "Culture-specific metaphors are best represented in phraseology. Native language idioms and set phrases can blend together ethno-specific concepts pertaining to the world view of its speakers, to their national character, as well as their traditional social relations, thus becoming an embodiment of national dispositions and spiritual values. They are presented metaphorically indirectly and figuratively, which is why culture-specific metaphors produce idioms that have no corresponding counterparts in another language" (Maalej, 2005, p.215).

In a contribution by Ter-Sargsyan (2017) the aim was to emphasize the importance of teaching idioms in business English from an Armenian perspective. The study forcefully points to the idea that it is essential for students majoring in business to learn specific set phrases or idioms which will enable them to communicate in appropriate business settings. To address this, the article also concentrates on a wide range of classroom activities for teaching business English idioms through online learning resources, such as *fluentu.com* website (Nash, 2025) providing illustrations/pictures of idioms followed by their contextual use and translation.

The business idioms landscape is enriched by Malyuga and Aleksandrova's (2020) study which sheds light on the communicative-pragmatic aspect of idiomatic expressions in English business discourse. Thus, special attention is paid to the figurative tools used by English-speaking business people whose idiomatic richness accounts for 40% of the examined sample. In agreement with Maalej's (2005) and Savitsky's (2019) approach to cultural codes in professional discourse and communication, Malyuga and Aleksandrova take a similar stand when referring to idioms as the vehicles of thought contributing to the creation of a figurative portrayal of the world, transmitting native speakers' cultural codes. Their findings underscore the necessity of devising a 5-sized linguopragmatic analysis of the most frequent semantic groups of idiomatic expressions given the ever-growing interactions between business people.

A recently published study by Sadigzade (2025) focuses on teaching idiomatic expressions, with a positive impact on students' lexical competence. The researcher aims to prove the tangible benefits of idiomatic proficiency in real-world communication. The article shapes a new approach on the basis of three parameters, i.e. benefits (richness and depth of language), challenges (potential for misunderstanding), and solutions (contextual learning and extensive usage practice). Through

many references to other similar studies in the field, it underscores the importance of precise usage as a highly recommended method through conversations, multimedia resources, videos, etc. Findings reveal that, in the business context, for instance, the appropriate use of idioms such as "think outside the box" or "hit the ground running" can lead to achieving fluent communication and fostering better relationships with colleagues and clients.

3. Research methodology

This research has concentrated on offering an insight into the tactful, tentative language (mild, gentle phrases as main forms of euphemisms) which contributes a lot to the creation of favourable business relationships, on the one hand, and making an effort to learn our business counterpart's language by grasping the meaning of certain words, on the other. The emphasis was placed on the air of freshness and novelty due to the power of metaphors (idiomatic expressions) coming from contexts like sport, secrecy and discretion, entertainment, or theatre which become the meaning-forming base for many idioms used in the English business discourse.

The research methodology has aimed to focus on different uses of indirect, friendly versions of words/phrases deemed unpleasant or embarrassing as tools to help us appear more cooperative and likeable to our interlocutors, and the extensive use of idiomatic expressions which are doing the rounds in the business lexicon nowadays.

In this case, I have provided examples of bland phrases, grouped them into the parts of speech they belong to (nouns, adjectives, verbs) and established a few contexts in accordance with some specific situations characteristic of business deals, workplace relations, or product selling. As regards the idiomatic expressions, I have suggested some classifications and insisted on specific categories of idioms (and their common origins) in order to 'fix' the meaning of these expressions which are more difficult to understand and grasp new vocabulary words.

Research has shown that keeping up with the current trends in intercultural business environment can greatly help us enhance our vocabulary breadth with terminology (phraseology) whose meaning is contextually specific.

4. Findings

The results of the paper can be structured around two communication axes, i.e. interpreting business euphemisms as a form of linguistic polishing/whitewashing language and classifying native language idioms and set phrases according to the area of usage.

4.1. Euphemisms' variation in terms of length, structure, and function

From the corporate buzzwords classification point of view, there is a large class of business terms (*euphemisms*). Various online sources include a mixture of words and phrases which have been created to mask the rudeness of certain words (Clark, 2020 <https://languageonlineservices.com/2020/02/35-business-euphemisms/>; Schneider, 2011 <https://lynnschneiderbooks.com/2011/12/23/20-examples-of-great-euphemisms/>; Summers, 2007 <https://archive.org/details/longmanbusiness0000unse>; *The Ridiculous Business Jargon Dictionary* <https://businessjargon.com/dictionary-a-words/>).

From the linguistic point of view, all these words should be arranged according to the parts of speech they belong to, the psychological state they create or the emotions they lead to, as I suggest below:

a) verbs → **apple polish** – suck-up (informal: *apple polish to the boss*) to compliment someone insincerely; **bottom line it** (to summarize); **break your crayons** (to tread on somebody's toes; to get on somebody's nerves, ruining their day: e.g. *He purposely deleted the clause from the contract. He's just trying to break your crayons*); **do the needful** (to work for money); **eat the reality sandwich** (to wake-up from delusions; do not have unrealistic expectations or unreasonable hopes: e.g. *If you still think you'll get a higher position, even though your performance has been terrible lately, you'd better / you seriously need to eat the reality sandwich*); **put a lipstick on a pig** (to embellish a negative, unappealing product so that it appears more pleasant and profitable than it

was before); **promote to customer** (to fire); **air/wash your dirty linen** (to bring your personal problems into the open); **milk somebody for something** (cynical euphemism; to seize an opportunity for your own ends, often unfairly: e.g. *The directors have been accused of milking the company for several million dollars*);

b) adjectives → **back-of-the-envelope** (financial calculations made without careful planning or completed in a quick, reckless manner: e.g. *back-of-the-envelope calculations*); **lost in the sauce** (misguided, lacking job orientation: e.g. *lost in the sauce new recruits*); **on the carpet** (summoned by your superior to explain a serious error, such as spending excessively: e.g. *They were called on the carpet for devaluation of company accounts*); **ninth inning** (a baseball term meaning something left to the last moment: e.g. *The hostile takeover was completely ninth inning*); **uber** (a borrowed German word: better, larger, or greater; very, super: e.g. *I'm uber-excited by the prospect of a partnership. I'm uber-excited by this job opportunity.*); **lukewarm** (uninterested (in), unexcited (by); lacking enthusiasm for something: e.g. *The stock market took a lukewarm reaction to the announcement. The government got a lukewarm reception from oil companies*); **(be) a snip** (a bargain-basement good or service: e.g. *At £5 for two sets of creams, they are a snip!*);

c) nouns → **dead beat** (a bad taxpayer: e.g. *raise taxes on dead-beats*); **loss leader** (a product or service which is sold cheaply but which is hoped to bring great profits later); **the milk round** (cynical, dishonest euphemism meaning advantageous job offers made by companies in colleges to determine students to work for them: e.g. *The firm's new sales representatives were selected on the milk round*); **dirty laundry** (dysphemistic euphemism – illegal business documents or unfair/dishonest business activities/practices which an organization would prefer to keep under lock and key); **involuntary entrepreneur** (an out of job employee who is forced into taking on new jobs to supplement his/her income); **knowledge density** (an unclear/confused/vague idea about something; a limited capacity to provide quality information in an area of work or study: e.g. *I'm sorry, I don't have the knowledge density to act on the information*); **low decision latitude** (the inability of low-ranking persons to take important decisions: e.g. *Employees have low decision latitude in organizing their work*); **ear candy** (slang - a praise or nice compliment that is pleasant to the ears); **(an) empty suit(s)** (a rich but superficial businessman lacking substance and personality: e.g. *He's nothing but an empty suit who couldn't run the business but for the help of his peers*); **meltdown** (a nuclear energy metaphor meaning a frail economic situation in which prices fall dramatically and product sales result in huge losses: e.g. *financial meltdown: Prices plummeting for the fourth consecutive day might lead to a near meltdown in overseas stock markets*); **my understanding** (an evasive answer to a question that avoids a definite 'yes' or 'no'); **perfect storm** (a mixture / load of unfavourable business events that weaken the economy leading to catastrophic results: e.g. *Business analysts are experiencing the perfect storm of galloping inflation, huge foreign debt and an unskilled/a shrinking labour force*); **white elephant** (an unsound and useless/impractical building for which a lot of money was invested: e.g. *The old pavilion for trade exhibitions is in bad condition – a white elephant of impressive proportions*).

The Guardian's Careers Blog compiles a set of the worst office jargon (*irritating euphemisms*) that 'knowledge workers' seem to be very fond of, using language that is unnecessarily long and complicated, and disguising the fact that their business might be in trouble. We can just ward off our uncertainty about some of these impressive-sounding phrases (Smith, 2014 <https://www.theguardian.com/careers/careers-blog/worst-office-jargon-phrases-staff-love-hate-management-speak>):

Instead of using:	Prefer:
- <i>Helicopter view</i> (of the business)	Broad overview or summary of an issue ('a bird's-eye view')
- <i>Low/ not enough bandwidth</i>	Too busy to take on extra work
- <i>Touch base offline</i>	Let's meet and talk.
- <i>We should pivot that idea.</i>	We should put this idea differently.
- <i>Idea shower/Thought shower</i>	Let's come up with more ideas.
- <i>Don't boil the ocean</i>	Don't waste time.
- <i>Low hanging fruit</i>	Earning a quick profit with little effort
- <i>It's on my radar</i>	I'm aware of this. /I'll focus attention on this.
- <i>Close of play</i> (sport metaphor)	It's the end of the day.
- <i>Peel the onion; Sweep the sheds</i>	Examine a problem in detail

- *Be in the saddle*

Manage, oversee

4.2. Idioms' classification according to the area of usage

According to LinguaLink DC (22 Dec 2016), "Depending on your cultural background, some idioms might sound very familiar or can even be used in your native language while others might seem strange, confusing or even funny" (<https://www.lingualinkdc.net/blog/10idioms>). It states the frequency with which idioms pervade the languages of different countries - rugby idioms are very common in Australia, football and baseball idioms are widely used in the United States - and classifies idioms according to the area of usage:

a) Idioms about secrecy and discretion:

- ***behind closed doors*** (if something happens behind closed doors, it happens in private and the public are not allowed in)

e.g. *The members of the creditors' committee discussed the sale of the company behind closed doors.*

- ***to spill the beans*** (to reveal a secret that someone else wanted you to keep)

e.g. *The unexpected merger split the beans of some blocked accounts.*

- ***to cover your tracks*** (to hide or destroy evidence of what you have done so that other people cannot find out)

e.g. *She started to destroy compromising documents to cover her tracks.*

- ***to keep someone in the dark*** (if you ~, you don't inform them about something)

e.g. *Many workers were kept in the dark about the company's plans to relocate its corporate headquarters.*

b) Idioms from the area of entertainment:

- ***behind the scenes*** (*theatre metaphor* describing something that is done in great secret, while other things are happening publicly).

e.g. *Behind the scenes, both parties are making a deal to sell the land to a real-estate developer).*

- ***waiting /lurking in the wings*** (*stage metaphor*: ready to act when the time is right)

e.g. *Several executives are lurking in the wings ready for promotion to new posts as part of the reorganization;*

- ***a balancing act*** (*circus metaphor*, euphemism: a difficult compromise; when you are trying to please two or more people or groups who all want different things, or who have ideas that are completely different from each other)

e.g. *The government had to perform a balancing act of preserving the economic interests without neglecting the environmental ones.*

- ***to run the show*** (*theatre metaphor*: to be in charge of an area of activity, affair, business, etc.)

e.g. *Given that the CEO retired from the business, his son is running the show now.*

Since that business is running the show, marketing the product will be a guaranteed success.

5. Conclusions

Seen retrospectively, the existence of euphemisms in business rhetoric could be interpreted as an antidote to offensive language, a veneer of politeness, as well as a forceful instrument of manipulation through the power of language to control thoughts.

Among other forms of verbal interaction, 'special topics' idioms are some of the most common and numerous of all idioms and have to be taught and learnt as fixed expressions, each with its own meaning.

That is why it is best to learn each combination as a phrase, rather than try to remember the adjective, noun and verb separately. Although they clearly break the established linguistic rules, these phrases make the conversational tone of certain business situations more expressive and more colourful.

On the basis of the above examples it can be concluded that, in order to get a good knowledge of euphemisms and idioms, business people should engage in fluent and culturally aware communication that will enable them to grasp contextual nuances, connotations, new word meanings, and delve into the subtleties of corporate language.

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