

The Importance of Dysphemism in English

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Received: 25 August 2025; **Accepted:** 13 September 2025; **Published:** 31 October 2025

Abstract: Language is not only a means of conveying neutral or polite content; it also allows speakers to express negative, insulting, or provocative attitudes. Dysphemisms are expressions that are more harsh or offensive than a neutral or euphemistic alternative. They serve rhetorical, psychological, social, and pragmatic functions. Examining dysphemisms helps us understand how speakers manipulate tone, identity, power, and social norms. This article discusses what dysphemisms are, why people use them, the functions they perform in English, and their importance in media, politics, interpersonal communication, and culture.

Keywords: Orthophemisms, dysphemisms, humor, irony, sarcasm.

Introduction: Definitions and theoretical Background. A dysphemism is a word or phrase used instead of a more neutral or polite term, with the intent of being offensive, harsh, to degrade, or simply more emphatic. Dysphemisms contrast with euphemisms (which soften) and orthophemisms. From a pragmatic/semantic viewpoint, dysphemisms carry strong connotations, rely heavily on context, and often act as face threatening acts (from politeness theory) or as tools of identity, solidarity, or antagonism. Functions of Dysphemisms: Expressing Strong Negative Emotion when speakers feel anger, disgust, contempt or want to insult or degrade, dysphemisms provide a tool for more vivid, forceful expression. Rhetorical force and emphasis

to highlight something strongly or sharply. Using a dysphemism rather than a mild or neutral term can draw more attention, create shock, or break through politeness barriers. Identity, Group membership, and solidarity or exclusion within groups, dysphemistic terms can serve as bonding (if shared), or mark outsiders. Also can reflect social power dynamics: insult, mockery, or voicing of dominance. Humor, Irony, Sarcasm sometimes dysphemisms are used in joking, ironic contexts to create a contrast between what is literally said vs. what is meant. Political / Media Discourse & Manipulation in politics and journalism, dysphemisms are tools to discredit opponents or portray them negatively. They can shape public opinion by prejudicial framing. Taboo, Shock Value, Social Norm

Testing they push boundaries. Sometimes people use dysphemisms to test what is acceptable, or to violate expectations.

- Calling someone a pig, rat, snake etc., as insults: these are dysphemistic epithets.
- In media/political context: using harsh language to frame a group or policy (e.g. referring to "bureaucrats" as "parasites", or calling a law "stupid", etc.). (Not always quoted, but such usage is analyzed in studies of political discourse)

Why Dysphemisms Matter. Understanding dysphemisms is important for several reasons:

1. Pragmatic competence. If you understand when it is acceptable or not to use dysphemisms, you avoid miscommunication, offense, or social faux pas.
2. Cultural literacy. Dysphemisms are deeply embedded in culture (taboos, values, what is "bad" or "wrong"). They reflect what societies find offensive. Knowledge of dysphemisms gives insight into those values.
3. Critical Discourse and Media Literacy. Recognizing how dysphemisms are used in political or media texts helps detect bias, manipulation, framing, and emotional appeal.
4. Stylistics, Literature and Rhetoric. Writers, speakers, or poets may employ dysphemisms for effect: characterisation, tension, realism, satire.
5. Social, Ethical and Linguistic Implications. Use of dysphemisms intersects with issues of hate speech,

discrimination, power asymmetries. What is a taboo, what is offensive, how language enforces or resists stigma or oppression all relevant.

Possible Challenges and Considerations

- Risks of offense or harm: misuse of dysphemisms can wound, perpetuate stereotypes, cause social conflict.
- Context matters heavily: what is acceptable in casual speech may be unacceptable in formal settings.
- Shifting norms: what was once acceptable may become taboo, and vice versa. Words can change connotation over time.
- Ethical dimension: For writers, journalists, or public speakers, using dysphemisms responsibly (or avoiding them) may be a matter of ethics, not just style.

Conclusion

Dysphemisms in English are not just “harsh language” or “bad words.” They are powerful tools of expression that serve many functions—emotional, rhetorical, ethical, social. Their usage tells us about values, power, identity, and what a society tolerates or rejects. For students of English, linguistics, media studies, or anyone using English in social/political/public contexts, awareness of dysphemisms is essential.

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