

# When humour questions taboo

## A typology of twisted euphemism use

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The article examines the ways in which humour twists regular euphemism use. Based on the classical fields of euphemisms anchored in religion, aesthetics, social politics, and amorality, it identifies the characteristics of their twisted variants with a humorous component: playing-with-fire euphemisms that jocosely provoke supernatural forces, innuendo euphemisms that entertain, mocking euphemisms that make fun of others in a teasing or demeaning way, and idealistic euphemisms that uncover obfuscating language and negative realities. Using English, German, French, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish euphemisms of different periods and genres, the article analyses the intentions, origins, motives, functions, and styles of humour, differentiates between symbiotic and parasitic twists, and thus provides a typology of twisted euphemism use.

**Keywords:** euphemism, humour, entertainment, context-dependency, typology

### 1. Introduction

Formal and informal proscriptions on using certain words due to their denotation and/or connotation exist in every speech community. These proscriptions are generally called *taboos*. When speech community members feel the desire to talk about taboo matters without breaking the taboo, they can switch to other expressions that are taboo-free and generally called *euphemisms*. In a basic approach, euphemisms are hence expressions allowing the avoidance of taboo words. In this article, we show how, with which intentions and which styles the use of euphemisms can be linked to humour.

We follow Miguel Casas Gómez (2012: 45), who takes a speech act perspective on euphemism use: the euphemistic force of an expression depends on the context, the illocution of the speaker, and the identification of that illocution by the

recipients. Expressions that are euphemistic in one context can be orthophemistic (i.e. neither euphemistic nor dysphemistic) or even dysphemistic in another context. Therefore, Keith Allan and Kate Burridge (1991:30–31) highlight the possibility of euphemistic dysphemisms and of dysphemistic euphemisms (or, in a different wording, “quasi-dysphemisms” and “quasi-euphemisms”, see Crespo-Fernández 2018:44). Within this pragmatic variability, a less intuitive but still frequent aspect has repeatedly been highlighted: euphemisms can be linked to humour, which gives them additional illocutionary and perlocutionary qualities. Given the original sense of taboo and the social consequences of breaking it, euphemisms generally have a serious background. We therefore assume that the serious (henceforth ‘straight’) use is the primary one and take it as the default setting. Since humorous use (partially) questions this seriousness, we argue that it is a ‘twisted’ use. However, this twisted use is a secondary one that can still be derived from the straight one. For our analysis of twisted use, we build on Ursula Reutner’s typology of euphemism use (2009), which allows the distinction between speaker intentions, anchorings, origins, motives, and functions. It defines euphemisms as “taboo-free expressions that, through modification or lexical substitution, avoid other expressions underlying a taboo” (2009:405, our translation).

Several scholars have shown that taboo itself clearly can be a source of humour. Elijah Wald (2018) explains how the jocular use of taboo expressions can help to strengthen social bonds in group-internal interactions, and Barry J. Blake (2018:370) points out that their use may increase the authenticity of humorous texts (also see Jay 2018:83ff.). Allan and Burridge (1991:165) describe the possibility of “gallows humour” e.g. in the funeral industry, a type of humour that can also be found among hospital staff who use designations such as *vegetables* ‘comatose patients’ when speaking about patients in group-internal communication (see Benczes & Burridge 2018:75). Beyond taboo or even dysphemistic expressions, euphemisms can be linked to humour in various ways too. This includes allusions and sexual innuendo employed for entertainment in poems and songs (see Allan & Burridge 1991:210–220, Blake 2018), as well as exaggeratedly euphemistic job titles that ridicule political correctness (see Reutner 2009:365, Casas Gómez 2009:56), the satirical use of euphemisms e.g. in political comedy (see Burridge 2012:70), the parody of euphemistic bureaucratic language (see Allan & Burridge: 206–207) inviting recipients to take a critical perspective on real politics, seemingly polite compliments in personal interaction that are meant and/or perceived as “[p]oliteness” or “pseudo-politeness” (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2013:21), and finally jocular euphemistic (and dysphemistic) hints in marketing contexts that make it easier to advertise taboo-related products such as laxatives (see López Díaz 2009).

As can be seen from this brief overview, the motives and functions of humorous euphemism use are quite diverse, as are their styles of humour. The present article aims at sorting and systemizing this plurality of uses. Therefore, it provides a comparison between straight and twisted use, analyses the styles of humour involved, describes the humorous illocutions, i.e. the motives and functions of humorous euphemism use, and finally offers a typology of humorous euphemism use. After the presentation of Reutner's (2009) typology (see Section 2), we give more detailed definitions of 'twisted' use and humour (see Section 3). Based on the four anchorings of straight use, four basic twisted types can be identified: playing-with-fire, innuendo, mocking, and idealistic euphemisms. After bringing up definitions and examples of each twisted type in their prototypical assignment to one of Reutner's four fields (see Sections 3.1–3.4), we explain variations of the four fields resulting in less prototypical assignments (see Section 3.5), and conclude with a typology of twisted euphemism use (see Section 4). The examples originate in two language families, Germanic (English, German) and Romance (French, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish), and in various periods and genres, ranging from Renaissance poetry to contemporary tweets.

## 2. Typology of straight euphemism use

Reutner (2009) distinguishes between four fields of euphemism use according to different speaker intentions, anchorings, origins, motives, functions, and core topics. The analysis of speaker intentions refers to the question of whether speakers intend to maintain or to obfuscate the connection to reality. Anchoring refers to the different traditional sources of euphemism use (see Reutner 2009:368). Origins constitute the deeper psychological roots from which the immediate motives of euphemism use can be derived, resulting in its specific functions in communication (see Reutner 2009: 401–405).

### Religion

The first field is anchored in religion. Here, euphemism use originates in a religious and/or mythological conception of language, resulting in respect and fear of supernatural forces as motives for avoiding tabooed expressions. The function of euphemism use therefore is protection against these forces. Classic topics of this field are faith, superstition, and magic as well as diseases and death (see Reutner 2009: 407). Common examples for death euphemisms include the metaphors of SLEEP and REST that we find across languages, such as in Germ. *sanft im Herrn entschlafen*/Fr. *s'endormir dans le Seigneur*/It. *addormentarsi nel Signore*/Pg. *des-*

*cansar no Senhor/Sp. descansar en el Señor* ‘to pass away peacefully’, lit. ‘to (gently) fall asleep in the Lord/to rest in the Lord’ (see Reutner 2009: 48, 2012b: 295, 2013: 169, 2014: 329).

### Aesthetics

Euphemism use in the second field is anchored in aesthetics. It originates in the speaker’s striving for mutual respect and self-respect. The speaker’s motives are hence the consideration of the recipient’s feelings linked with decency, sense of tact and sense of shame, the speaker’s fear of social sanctions that might result from non-euphemistic speech, and his or her striving for linguistic distinction. The different functions depend on these motives: they spare the recipient’s feelings and show the speaker’s ability for refined language use; they furthermore protect the speaker from social stigmatization. This field’s core topic is the human body, with sexuality, the female cycle, body parts, and scatology as subfields (see Reutner 2009: 407). A standard example is Engl. *to make love*/Germ. *Liebe machen*/Fr. *faire l’amour*/It. *fare l’amore*/Pg. *fazer amor*/Sp. *hacer el amor*, where love stands for the sexual act.

### Social politics

In the third field, euphemism use is anchored in social politics. As in the sphere of aesthetics, this field too has the striving for mutual respect and self-respect as a general origin, which in this case leads to the strengthening of social prestige, the pursuit of political correctness and, again, the consideration of others as motives. Accordingly, euphemisms have the function of protecting and enhancing the status of minorities and to socially empower the speaker and others. Central topics of this field are race, disability, age, sexual identity, and low social prestige (see Reutner 2009: 407). Examples for euphemisms that make retirement age appear more positive by separating it from ‘real’ old age (the equally euphemistic *fourth age*) include Engl. *third age*/Germ. *drittes Lebensalter*/Fr. *troisième âge*/It. *terza età*/Pg. *terceira idade*/Sp. *tercera edad* (see Reutner 2009: 56–57, 2012b: 299, 2013: 172, 2014: 322, Burridge 2012: 74).

### Amorality

In opposition to the first three fields that try to maintain the connection to reality by veiling it, the speaker’s intention in the fourth field is to disconnect from reality by obfuscating it. Being anchored in amorality, euphemism use originates in the rejection of a certain reality within a society. The speaker’s motive is the striv-

ing for profit and prestige by avoiding directly naming these negative realities. Euphemisms thus have the function of deceiving and manipulating the recipients while saving the speaker's face. This type of euphemism can frequently be found in political, economic, financial, or warfare-related discourses (see Reutner 2009: 407). A standard example is Engl. *collateral damage*/Germ. *Kollateralschaden*/Fr. *dommage collateral*/It. *danno collaterale*/Pg. *dano colateral*/Sp. *daño colateral* that is softer, less transparent, and therefore more deceptive than *civilian war victims*.

### Typology of straight euphemism use

The different aspects of the four fields of euphemism use result in the typology as shown in Table 1 (reproduced from Reutner 2009: 407). It highlights connections between the fields: euphemism use both in the fields of aesthetics and social politics originates in the striving for mutual respect and self-respect, which leads to the consideration of others as a common motive.

**Table 1.** Typology of straight euphemism use

Anchoring	Religion	Aesthetics	Social politics	Amorality
speaker intention		maintenance of the connection to reality		obscuration of the connection to reality
origins	mythological-religious conception of language	striving for mutual respect and self-respect		social rejection of certain realities
motives	respect and fear	consideration of others		striving for profit and prestige
		decency, sense of tact, sense of shame, fear, striving for distinction	strengthening of social prestige, political correctness	
functions	protection against supernatural forces	sparing of others, expression of the speaker's refinement, protection from social stigmatization	protection and enhancement of minorities, social empowerment of the speaker and others	deception, manipulation, face-saving
topics	faith, superstition, magic, diseases and death	sexuality, female cycle, body parts, scatology	race, disability, age, sexual identity, low social prestige	politics, economy, financial system, warfare

It is important to stress that this typology does not exclude humorous euphemisms but simply does not highlight them explicitly, which makes it a good basis for developing their characteristics in more detail. Also note that a euphemistically used expression can belong to more than one field within this typology: diachronically, the anchorings for euphemisation can change. For instance, the taboo of not naming diseases and death directly today is not usually motivated by the fear of provoking supernatural forces as in the field of religion anymore, but rather by the wish to be tactful as in the sphere of aesthetics. Synchronically too, the anchoring may vary: *to fall* ‘to die in war’, for example, can be used to distract from military failure in the realm of amorality or to spare the feelings of the bereaved in the area of aesthetics. The typology thus captures prototypical combinations. The insight that the anchorings can vary both synchronically and diachronically makes it, however, necessary to analyse each situation individually. This context dependency now constitutes the starting point for our systematization of twisted euphemism use.

### 3. Twisted euphemism use

Parting from straight use, we analyse what happens when the illocutions of these four fields get humorously twisted. By *twisted*, we refer to its meaning in the neutral sense of ‘bent, turned’, and not in the negatively connotated sense of ‘perverted, sick, cruel’. We define euphemism use as twisted as soon as it gains a humorous component on the illocutionary level, i.e. on the levels of motives and functions. The perlocutionary impact of twisted euphemism use depends on the recipients’ identification of the ‘twistedness’ and is not part of our research. As to the relation between twisted and straight use, we distinguish between symbiotic and parasitic relations. In symbiotic ones, the humorous illocution accompanies the characteristics of straight use so that straight use is only slightly twisted. In parasitic relations, straight use is imitated, and a new illocution replaces the original one so that the straight use is twisted to such a degree that it is reversed. Moreover, we differentiate between two types of twisting. On the one hand, we presume that all straight euphemisms can generally be twisted; we call them *twistable*. On the other hand, there are expressions that, despite looking like straight euphemisms at first sight, were never meant to comply with straight use; given their pseudo-euphemistic character, we call them *originally twisted*. Although it might not always be easy to decide if an expression was originally intended for straight or for twisted use, this terminological distinction helps to get a more precise grasp of the way euphemistic twisting works.

Given the various contexts and purposes of euphemistic humour, we define humour in a broad sense. Designations for the different dimensions of humour may sometimes differ; therefore, we follow Willibald Ruch et al. (2018: 3–4) who distinguish between eight different styles, namely *sarcasm*, *cynicism*, *satire*, *irony*, *fun*, *benevolent humour*, *nonsense*, and *wit*. According to their definitions, sarcasm is used to offend and to express scorn towards others, while cynicism is a disillusioned style that “exhibit[s] a negative and destructive attitude”, and satire, beyond being aggressive like the former two, is employed with “the intention of improving the world”; together with irony, which aims at creating a difference between insiders who understand the oblique messages and outsiders who do not, these four are classified as sceptical styles. They are opposed to three “lighter” ones: fun “is aimed at spreading good mood” through making jokes, benevolent humour “aims at arousing sympathy and an understanding” for the imperfection of the world and of humans, and nonsense is a generally purpose-free “intellectual and playful” style. Finally, wit unites elements of both groups, aiming at the creation of surprising and often malicious puns; we add the intention of provocation to this category.

### 3.1 Playing-with-fire euphemism

The first twisted type is anchored in the realm of religion and gives a provocative twist to straight use. Originating in a mythological-religious conception of language like their straight counterparts, playing-with-fire euphemisms make it possible to veil reality without losing the connection to it. In a symbiotic twist, the straight motives of respect and fear are complemented by those of careful fearlessness, the wish to reduce inner stress, and the striving for provocative puns, so that the straight function of protection from supernatural forces is enriched by the provocation of these very forces and the wish to use language as a kind of safety valve in order to gain relief and to touch a forbidden kind of pleasure. The phenomenon of gaining satisfaction from deliberately provoking supernatural forces can be explained by Sigmund Freud’s remark that the forbidden is especially tempting and therefore pushes speakers to test their limits: “in their unconscious, they would like nothing better than to transgress them [the taboo prohibitions] but they are also afraid to do it” (Freud 1919: 53, also see Reutner 2009: 172–173). Blake (2018: 354) observes that “[t]he naughtiness of breaking a taboo can be a great source of satisfaction”. The following examples show that just imagining breaking a taboo can be satisfying.

When the French King Henry IV (1553–1610) did not cease to swear, his father confessor, Père Cotton, asked him at least not to employ the blasphemous (and already euphemistic) *jarnidieu* (< *je renie Dieu* ‘I deny God’), whereupon the king

switched to *jarnicoton* (see France 1907, s.v., also see Reutner 2009:169). Given the homophony of the name *Cotton* and *coton* ‘cotton’, the substitute curse can be read as ‘I deny [Père] Cotton’ or ‘I deny cotton’. This anecdote combines two styles of humour: on the hand, the taboo of blasphemy being only superficially maintained, the expression is daring (hence the playing-with-fire component), provocative (both towards God and Père Cotton), and thus witty; on the other hand, the absurdity of ‘I deny cotton’ reflects the humorous style of nonsense.

The same applies to related cases: expressions like Fr. *jarnibleu*, *jarnigoi*, *jarniguienne* further deform *dieu* ‘God’ and hence enable swearing that only scratches the forbidden (see Reutner 2009:172). This approach was and is particularly strong in Québec, where religiously inspired swearing is a linguistic heritage of the Quiet Revolution that reduced the power of Catholicism in the 1960s. The deformation of religious terms constitutes a highly expressive and creative phenomenon: for *tabernacle* or short *tabernak* ‘tabernacle’, for example, we find deformations with rather nonsensical suffixations such as *tabarnache*, *tabarnane*, or *tabarouette* used as swearing interjections (see Légaré & Bougaïeff 1984: 45). These and similarly deformed swear words have in common that they respect the taboo of not directly naming God or religious objects. However, the process of deforming sacred names can also be a source of forbidden joy that results in provocative euphemistic humour. The act of provoking supernatural forces through euphemistic swearing is accompanied by a relative fearlessness: “Sacrer c’était s’affirmer, montrer que nous n’avions pas peur de la puissance divine” (‘Swearing was self-affirming, showing that we were not afraid of God’s power’, Charest 1974: 61, also see Reutner 2009: 172). Semantically nonsensical and at the same time witty examples from other languages include creative expressions such as Engl. *holy buckets*, *holy Pretzel* or *holy cow* for *holy Christ* (see Spears 1981, s.v.), Germ. *Sack Zement* ‘sack of cement’ for *Sakrament* ‘sacrament’, or It. *per dindirindina* or *per dindiriddio* for *per Dio* ‘by God’ (see Reutner 2009: 43).

A last example that includes wit in combination not with nonsense but with cynicism concerns death and can be explained by the fact that “people swear when they experience pain” (Jay 2018:85). Let us consider, for example, Sp. *la dientuda* ‘the large-toothed one’, a Mexican euphemism for *death* (see Kany 1960: 24) that complies with the rule of not mentioning death directly. Let us then imagine a Mexican who, when being surprised by a violent thunderstorm without any protection in sight, stubbornly and provocatively exclaims *No me vas a agarrar, dientuda* ‘you won’t catch me, large-toothed one’. The utterance is highly fate-tempting since it questions the power of death by metonymically reducing a personified death to its set of teeth; beyond the wit of a provocative pun, it therefore contains a fatalistic and disillusioned cynicism. Here, too, the locutionary level of euphemistic speech is maintained since the direct expression *muerte*



‘death’ is not used. Yet, the straight motives of fear and respect towards supernatural forces are enriched with a demonstrative fearlessness towards death that somewhat questions the original euphemistic force and creates humorous relief in a threatening situation.

### 3.2 Innuendo euphemism

The second twisted type is anchored in the field of aesthetics and gives an allusive twist to straight use. Originating in the striving for mutual respect and self-respect like their straight counterparts, innuendo euphemisms also retain a connection to the reality they seek to veil. In a symbiotic twist, the straight motives consisting in decency, sense of tact, sense of shame and the fear of social stigmatization are complemented by the wish to surprise and the striving for amusement and distraction. They thus correlate with the straight functions of protecting others, expressing the speaker’s refinement, and guarding the speaker against social stigmatization, as well as with the twisted functions of providing an entertaining intellectual stimulus to the recipients who thereby gain pleasure and relief.

As an amusing English example where a “bawdy poem [or any text, we may add] cloaks its bawdiness” (Allan 2012: 21), Allan and Burridge (1991: 201–202) cite Grit Laskin’s *Camera song* that links technical details of the camera with sexual organs and the act of photography with the sexual act; other contemporary and highly popular English examples include lyrics such as the fellatio-evoking “You can blow my whistle, baby” from Flo Rida’s song *Whistle* (2012). A historic genre where innuendo is characteristic is Renaissance poetry (see Reutner & Heidepeter 2020). In Example (1), the maypole (*le mai*) and the girlfriend’s garden ([*le*] *petit jardin*), in which the tree is planted, represent male and female genitalia; the planting itself metaphorically describes the act of penetration.

- (1) *Il ferait bon planter le mai*  
*Au petit jardin de s’amie.* (Dottin 1991: 34)  
 ‘Planting the maypole  
 in the girlfriend’s garden.’

In Example (2), *rebaiser* ‘to kiss again’ can be understood as a *pars pro toto* for the sexual act that is furthermore present in the metaphorical *combat doux* ‘sweet combat’.

- (2) *Sus donc, m’amour, rebaisons nous,*  
*Recommençant ce combat doux.* (Dottin 1991: 116)  
 ‘My love, let us kiss again,  
 let us restart this sweet combat.’

The frequent metaphor of death (see Macy 1996: 2–5) that can also be found in the lyrics “to die with thee again” from John Dowland’s *Come again* (1597, see Kelnberger 2004: 226–227) refers to orgasm in Example (3). The quote also features birds, represented here by the swan, that have a strong sexual connotation in Renaissance poetry, potentially referring both to sexual desire in general and more specifically to male genitalia (see van Orden 1995). Given this information, “[t]he informed reader of cinquecento literature recognizes immediately that this poem is not about swans but about sex” (Macy 1996: 5).

- (3) *Il bianco e dolce cigno  
cantando more, ed io  
piangendo giungo al fin del viver mio.  
Strana e diversa sorte,  
ch’ei more sconcolato,  
ed io moro beato.  
Morte che nel morire  
m’empie di gioia tutto e di desire;  
se nel morir altro dolor non sento,  
di mille morti il di sarei contento.*  
(attributed to Alfonso d’Avolos, early sixteenth century;  
quoted from Macy 1996: 5)
- ‘The white and gentle swan  
singing dies, And I  
weeping arrive at the end of my life.  
Strange and unusual fate,  
since he dies disconsolate,  
and I die blessed.  
Death that in the dying  
I am filled with all joy and desire;  
if in dying I feel no other pain  
I would be content to die a thousand deaths a day.’

A more recent Spanish example that Casas Gómez (2009: 737) describes as an “ode to masturbation” comes from Luis Eduardo Aute’s song *Dentro* (1969), where the ‘embracing of the lie’ euphemistically depicts auto-erotic activities.

- (4) *A veces recuerdo tu imagen  
desnuda en la noche vacía,  
tu cuerpo sin peso se abre  
y abrazo mi propia mentira.  
Así me reanuda la sangre,*

*tensando la carne dormida,  
mis dedos aprietan, amantes,  
un hondo compás de caricias.*

(Aute 1969; quoted from Casas Gómez 2009: 737)

‘Sometimes I picture you  
naked in the empty night  
your weightless body opens  
and I embrace my own lie.  
So my blood is renewed,  
tensing the sleeping flesh,  
my fingers tighten, lovingly,  
a deep rhythm of caresses.’

All these examples display fun as a style of humour as they can be used to create entertainment without targeting others, thus creating a pleasant atmosphere. Moreover, they include irony through allusions that not everyone might be able to understand at first sight, thereby creating a difference between insiders and outsiders. An additional nonsensical and word play-orientated side of humour is present in the following originally twisted euphemisms that belong to the French *contrepèteries* ‘spoonerisms’: by switching syllables, *cette jolie fille habite Laval* ‘this pretty girl lives in Laval’ turns into *cette jolie fille avale la bite* ‘this pretty girl devours the cock’, just as *Joseph a maculé Henri* ‘Joseph has soiled Henri’ changes to *Joseph a enculé Marie* ‘Joseph has sodomized Marie’ (see Reutner 2009: 125). Other examples that create humour from linguistic creativity treat menstruation and body parts beyond genitalia: expressions such as Germ. *Erdbeerwoche* ‘strawberry week’, Engl. *having the painters in*, (dated) Fr. *les Anglais ont débarqué* ‘the Englishmen have landed’ (see Delvau 1874, s.v. *Anglais*), or Sp. *Caperucita Roja* ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ employ the colour RED of fruit, clothes or paint for semantically creative and potentially amusing metaphorical perspectives on menstruation. We find more innovative and playful conceptualizations in French expressions for ‘bottom’, such as *le département du Bas-Rhin* ‘the Lower Rhine department’, *entrée des artistes* ‘artists’ entrance’ or *visage sanz nez* ‘face without a nose’ (see Nyrop 1913: 295), or for ‘breasts’, such as in *coussinets d’amour* ‘small love cushions’ as used by the French *Précieuses*, a group of seventeenth century women famous for their deliberately extravagant language style that avoids direct language (see Reutner 2007, 2009: 230, Blake 2018: 358). All these expressions are euphemistic and thus taboo-free. More importantly however, their use not only complies with decency, sense of tact and sense of shame: it is also accompanied by unexpected perspectives on the denoted objects that would be unnecessarily

complicated and verbose if they were intended only to euphemise and not also to amuse. This in turn gives them a humoristic added value (see Reutner 2009: 33).

Just as in straight use, the denoted objects are euphemistically veiled, thus protecting the speaker from social sanctions (see Allan & Burrige 1991: 210). What separates the twisted from straight use is that euphemistically used expressions are not only employed to solve taboo-related communicative problems: instead, the existence of taboos is the very factor that enables specific euphemism-related types of punning. Following Allan and Burrige (1991: 210–220), who highlight the playfulness of such euphemism use, innuendo euphemisms constitute an almost infinite playground of creativity for the creators of such puns. The mere wish for entertainment and intellectual pleasure can result in innovative euphemisms both in everyday and aesthetic communication. Thanks to this ludic character of innuendo euphemisms, their use can be an end in itself that contributes to the recipients' entertainment (see Burrige 2012: 71). Considering that “the best pornographer is the mind of the reader” (Epstein 1985: 64), Allan and Burrige (1991: 220, see also Burrige 2012: 70) include the possibility that sex-related innuendo euphemisms might even have an eroticizing effect on recipients. Allan (2012: 39) therefore describes this kind of euphemism use as the “titillation of the audience” through “artful euphemisms”. The entertainment arises when the recipients try to decode the euphemistically encoded message by unravelling it, which is necessary because of the message's *double entendre* structure, i.e. the combination of “an orthophemistic literal meaning and a sexually suggestive second meaning” (Allan 2012: 37, also see Blake 2018: 371). This process of decoding is often facilitated by three aspects: firstly, a cumulation of euphemistic sexual puns is characteristic for certain genres; secondly, puns may become conventionalized when being used time after time; thirdly, an initiated audience expects puns to appear in certain communication situations. These reasons often lead to a relative transparency of innuendo euphemisms that Allan and Burrige (1991: 220) accordingly describe as “diaphanous lingerie”.

### 3.3 Mocking euphemism

The third type of twisted usage is the mocking euphemism that can be subdivided in two subtypes: gently teasing mockery is still anchored in the field of social politics while demeaning mockery is only derived from this anchoring.

Mocking euphemisms of the teasing subtype originate in the striving for mutual respect and self-respect like their straight counterparts. In a symbiotic twist, the straight motives of strengthening social prestige and political correctness are complemented by the twisted motives of showing affection and the striving for friendly amusement. Both are reflected in the straight functions of

protecting minorities and empowering them and/or the speaker, as well as the new functions of comforting or cheering up and thereby creating pleasure and relief. This first subtype uses mockery as a tool for gentle teasing and thus uses euphemisms linked to the benevolent style of humour.

It is, for instance, imaginable that someone tries to comfort a friend who, questioning his body height in a crisis of self-esteem, would like to be taller. Reframing this self-evaluation by getting him an (actually existing) shirt that has ‘I’m not short, I’m just vertically challenged’ printed on it might hopefully result in cathartic laughing and consolation. A related example that uses gentle and comforting self-mockery is Jim Davis’ cartoon figure Garfield saying “I’m not overweight. I’m undertall”, just as the more recent German expression *Lockdownschaden* ‘lockdown damage’, which is an originally twisted euphemism built in analogy to *Kollateralschaden* ‘collateral damage’ (see also Section 3.4) referring to weight gained during the Covid-19 lockdown (see Reutner 2021: 427). Other examples related to Covid-19 cover the fact that the holidays had to be spent at home, which leads to portmanteaus such as Germ. *Haustralien* (< *Haus* ‘house’ + *Australien* ‘Australia’) or *Flurenz* (< *Flur* ‘corridor’ + *Florenz* ‘Florence’) that combine parts of the residence with destinations no longer reachable, thus making the new immobility appear more pleasant (see Reutner 2021: 424). The humorous use of job-related euphemisms has similar potential: when someone does not like being a taxi driver, the hint that she is not a simple taxi driver but an *external human resource distributor* (see Casas Gómez 2012: 56) might cheer her up at least for a short time.

Mocking euphemisms of the demeaning subtype constitute an opposed twist that turns them into dysphemisms. Like their straight counterparts, they seek to maintain the connection to reality. However, in the twisted case this is achieved by presumably reintroducing a relation that, in the speaker’s perspective, had gone astray. In this parasitic twist, the straight anchoring in the realm of social politics is thereby replaced by a ‘survival of the fittest’ attitude. The straight origin consisting in the striving for mutual respect and self-respect changes into the rejection of these very values and, on a metalinguistic level, partially also of allegedly misleading language use. The straight motives of strengthening social prestige and of political correctness are rejected and supplanted by aggressivity and the striving for amusement and distraction. Thus, instead of protecting disadvantaged groups and socially empowering them and/or the speaker, these groups are, together with their allies, insulted, ridiculed and provoked. Consequently, mocking euphemisms of that subtype only produce a cruel kind of pleasure and relief to the speaker. Being used to offend others, this subtype corresponds with the sarcastic style of humour.

To illustrate that, let us imagine Italian teachers filled with consternation, who describe their rather unsuccessful pupils as *dotati di differenti capacità* ‘gifted with different abilities’; from their intonation, we can conclude that, in their opinion, these poor pupils might not be gifted in any way at all. Let us then imagine people who have romantic dates and afterwards, only seemingly politely, describe their date partners as *differently interesting* with the clear intention of antiphrastically evaluating them as *boring*. Let us finally imagine white Germans who look down on people of colour by referring to them as *maximalpigmentiert* ‘maximally pigmented’, as in the following tweet:

- (5) *Da sind irgendwelche Maximalpigmentierte, die schreien auf irgendner [sic] komischen Sprache im Flur rum xD.* (Twitter 2014)  
 ‘There are some maximally pigmented [people] who shout in the corridor in some strange language.’

All cases reverse straight use and replace its well-intentioned language use with a demeaning top-down perspective, i.e. a perspective where the speaker degrades others who seem to be less powerful through derogatory naming strategies. In the examples of *dotati di differenti capacità* and *differently interesting*, the speakers do not mean what they say; in fact, they mean quite the opposite, making fun of students or date partners instead of actually praising alternative qualities, which turns them into “perfidious compliments” (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2013:21). The example of *maximalpigmentiert* mocks not only the people of colour mentioned, but also politically correct speech in general: we presume that the speaker knows about politically correct terms to refer to people of colour but tries to make fun of this tendency by using a taboo-avoiding expression that, although seemingly politically correct, is likely to be perceived as racist. In another sense, too, these cases differ from each other: in the case of *dotati di differenti capacità*, an expression known from straight use is twisted, while *differently interesting* and *maximalpigmentiert* constitute (pseudo-)euphemisms that probably are originally twisted. We can also discover examples of this second type in other English expressions such as *horizontally challenged* ‘obese’ or *cosmetically different* ‘ugly’ (see Reutner 2009:278–279, 2012a:127). More mocking perspectives upon the striving for correctness are present in the Italian expressions *eticamente corretto* ‘ethnically correct’ or *sessualmente corretto* ‘sexually correct’ that are lexicographically marked as ironic (see Reutner 2009:322). The mockery may even be taken to a metalinguistic level, such as in a German tweet from 2016:

- (6) *Wie ist das jetzt, wenn ich politisch korrekt sein will? Trinke ich dann meinen Kaffee maximalpigmentiert?* (Twitter 2016; also see Reutner 2009:278)  
 ‘How is it now when I want to be politically correct? Do I drink my coffee maximally pigmented?’

Mocking potential also comes from low prestige jobs that are given euphemistic and flattering new names (see Casas Gómez 2012:55). Beyond twistable euphemisms from straight use, we find several originally twisted expressions (see Reutner 2009:365) that (sarcastically or benevolently) mock the job activities denoted and may also question the straight use *in toto*. Among the examples provided by Casas Gómez (2012:56), *visual therapy expert* ‘stripper’, *field nourishment consultant* ‘waiter’, *expert in sexology and personal relations therapist* ‘prostitute’ or *music and film distribution expert* ‘hawker of pirate CDs’ deserve special mention.

### 3.4 Idealistic euphemism

The last twisted type is derived from the field of amorality and gives a mordant twist to straight use. Idealistic euphemisms change the straight speaker intention of obfuscating the connection to reality into the twisted intention of reintroducing that very connection by making it visible again. In this parasitic twist, the straight anchoring in the sphere of amorality is hence substituted by morality and the straight origin by the disapproval of certain realities and of misleading language use. The straight motive of striving for prestige and profit is perceived as egoistic and deceptive. It is thus replaced with the protest against obfuscating language and the underlying realities combined with the striving for morally satisfying amusement. Consequently, instead of allowing face-saving, deception and manipulation, idealistic euphemisms uncover and criticise deceptive language use and the negative realities behind it. The style of humour employed here above all is satire. We agree that “[i]n the mouth or pen of a political satirist, [...] euphemisms are deliberately provoking” (Burrige 2012:70), allowing the speaker to gain satisfaction by deconstructing and criticising misleading language and negative realities in a bottom-up approach, i.e. in an approach where those in seemingly weaker positions seek to criticise those in power. Beyond that criticism, satire also serves as a means for both speaker and recipients to cope with unpleasant aspects of life since the decision to laugh at them despite their negativity is at least a form of control that may lead to comic relief.

A Twitter example from August 2019 may serve as a good first illustration: a user reacted to a tweet that described police actions shown in a video from Cuba as “brutalidad policial” ‘police brutality’, satirically correcting this term by using *pacificación social* ‘social pacification’ instead:

- (7) *Eso no es brutalidad se llama pacificación social. La sociedad dispone de unos medios coercitivos para reconducir los comportamientos antisociales violentos. Por eso nadie se puede escandalizar ni hacer eco de tan alto acto de entrega de esos policías. Lo mío es sarcasmo.* (Twitter 2019)

‘This is not brutality, it is called social pacification. Society has some coercive measures at its disposal to redirect violent antisocial behaviour. Therefore, nobody can be outraged or make waves because of an act of such high commitment of these police officers. Mine [my tweet] is sarcasm.’

This use of *pacification* for violent actions is classic for straight deceptive euphemism use across languages and was already employed in the Roman empire (see Reutner 2009: 384): to date, Sp. *pacificación* and its equivalents Engl. *pacification*/Germ. *Befriedung*/Fr. *pacification*/It. *pacificazione*/Pg. *pacificação* are usually used by authorities and politics to justify their measures against seemingly dangerous groups. The tweet reminds the Twitter community about the softer, more ‘official’ and, most importantly, more deceptive term. The user’s emphasis that the tweet is not meant seriously indicates that both the police brutality and the official language use are criticized here.

The following examples twist the equally classic euphemism *collateral damage* from the field of amorality and its versions in other languages. In June 2020, a tweet referred to a statement by the Uruguayan president Luis Lacalle Pou who had described femicide as a deplorable collateral damage of the Covid-19 confinement:

- (8) *Mueren tres marinos; duelo nacional, mueren [sic] cada 23 horas una mujer por femicidios y es un ‘efecto collateral’.* (Twitter 2020)  
 ‘Three sailors die; national mourning, every 23 hours a woman dies from femicide and it is a “collateral effect”’.

The tweeter’s use of quotation marks indicates a distancing: the tweet twists the straight use that conceptualizes killed women as collateral damage to underline the tragedy of femicide and to highlight the deceptive cruelty of the original use. The same deception is criticized in a newspaper article from 2003 by the Belgian comedian Bruno Coppens who writes about the Iraq war and changes *dommages collatéraux* ‘collateral damages’ as known from straight use into *hommages collatéraux* ‘collateral homages’, thereby criticizing not only the war itself but also the language used to soften its brutality (also see Bacqueleine 2006: 477):

- (9) *Comment riposter aux frappes chirurgicales? [...] Eh bien provoquons les hommages collatéraux! Oui, rendons hommage aux disparus dont on ne parle pas assez. En effet, cette guerre est impitoyable pour les morts.* (Coppens 2003)  
 ‘How to counter surgical strikes? [...] Well, let us provoke collateral homages! Yes, let us pay homage to the disappeared of whom we do not speak enough. In fact, this war is merciless for the dead.’



The German version of this expression, *Kollateralschaden*, is used in a cartoon by Klaus Stuttmann from 2019 that criticizes sexual abuse within the Catholic church. It shows two priests in a confessional having the following conversation:

- (10) A: *Ich habe Kinder missbraucht. Und halte mir eine Nonne als Sklavin.*  
 B: *Ein Kollateralschaden des Zölibats – Gott wird uns vergeben.* (Stuttmann 2019)  
 ‘A: I have abused children. And I keep a nun as my slave.  
 B: A collateral damage of celibacy – God will forgive us.’

Another highly topical example for idealistic twisting is the parody of Germ. *neue Normalität* that we also find in Engl. *new normal*/Fr. *nouvelle normalité*/It. *nuova normalità*/Pg. *nova normalidade*/Sp. *nueva normalidad*. This expression, originally coined by philosopher Paul Sailer-Wlasits, was used by the Austrian chancellor Sebastian Kurz in April 2020 when referring to the drastic changes due to Covid-19 (see Rötzer 2020). It was perceived as deceptive by the Austrian far-right party FPÖ (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* ‘Freedom Party of Austria’) and many of its supporters, who made satirical use of the expression in order to criticize both the chancellor’s language use and the government’s handling of the pandemic (see YouTube 2020).

Satirical humour in combination with its funny dimension can be found in the parody of deceptive euphemistic language in bureaucratic communication. As an example, Allan and Burrige (1991:207) quote the British series *Yes Minister*, where the Cabinet Secretary Humphrey Appleby verbosely and deceptively paraphrases the tabooed concept of lying with the syntactically and semantically untransparent “affairs being conducted in a manner which, all things being considered and making all possible allowances is, not to put too fine a point on it, perhaps not entirely straightforward”.

A last example is of poetic nature and employs not only satire but also cynicism. In the poem *To any dead officer* (1917) by British World War I lieutenant Siegfried Sassoon, the narrator mourns the loss of a friend shot during a patrol walk. In the fourth stanza, the narrator explains that the friend was officially not declared *dead* but *wounded and missing*. He then explains in brackets that *wounded and missing* ultimately has the same denotation as *dead*; therefore, *wounded and missing* can be classified as a deceptive straight euphemism from the field of amorality that the desperate narrator does not appreciate at all. The non-euphemistic explanation of the expression, including the bitter-sounding words “dying slow”, make it seem plausible that the later pacifist Sassoon criticizes both the atrocities of war and the straight euphemism use.

- (11) So when they told me you'd been left for dead  
 I wouldn't believe them, feeling it must be true.  
 Next week the bloody Roll of Honour said  
 'Wounded and missing'– (That's the thing to do  
 When lads are left in shell-holes dying slow,  
 With nothing but blank sky and wounds that ache,  
 Moaning for water till they know  
 It's night, and then it's not worth while to wake!).  
 (Sassoon 1983: 83)

### 3.5 Variations

Based on the four anchorings of straight use (first column in Table 2), we introduced four types of twisted use (first row in Table 2). In Sections 3.1–3.4, we described prototypical assignments of the twisted types to their straight anchoring (grey fields in Table 2). Just as we find dynamic movements in the typology of straight use, we can also find them between twisted types, this time consisting in motives and functions prototypically belonging to one anchoring, but also occurring occasionally in others (white fields in Table 2). The following paragraphs, far from being exhaustive, explain the possibilities of such variations.

**Table 2.** Attribution of euphemistic domains and twisted types

	Playing-with-fire (i)	Innuendo (ii)	Mockery (iii)	Idealism (iv)
religion (i)	e.g. <i>jarnicoton!</i>	ii/i	iii/i	iv/i
aesthetics (ii)	i/ii	e.g. <i>Erdbeerwoche</i>	iii/ii	iv/ii
social politics (iii)	i/iii	ii/iii	e.g. <i>vertically challenged</i>	iv/iii
amorality (iv)	i/iv	ii/iv	iii/iv	e.g. <i>neue Normalität</i>

#### *Playing-with-fire euphemisms beyond religion*

The additional motives of careful provocation and of inner stress, the additional safety valve function and the function of provocation that we introduced for twisted euphemisms from the realm of religion also explain the twist of straight euphemisms from other fields. (i/ii) They can, for example, be found in swearing that does not use religious terms from the sphere of religion, but scatological and sexual terms from the field of aesthetics. In euphemistic interjections like Engl.

*sugar* or Germ. *Scheibenkleister* (literally ‘glass paste’), *shit* and its German equivalent *Scheiße* are only hinted at through the initial [ʃ], just as the initial sounds in Fr. *mercredi*/It. *mercoledì*/Sp. *miércoles* ‘Wednesday’ evoke Fr. *merde*/It. *merda*/Sp. *mierda* ‘shit’ (see Reutner 2009:80, 2012b:299, 2013:50). The same applies to the deformation of sexual swearing such as Engl. *feck* for *fuck* or to the frequent deformations of Sp. *hijo de puta* ‘son of a whore’ such as, among many others, *hijo de madre* ‘son of a mother’, *hijo de la Gran Bretaña* ‘son of Great Britain’ (see Casas Gómez 2012:51) and basically any noun beginning with [p] (see *ibid.*: 57, Kany 1960:170). The semantical absurdity of the expressions reflects the nonsensical style of humour, whereas the provocation that consists in indirectly referring to swear words corresponds to the witty dimension of humour. Just as in the examples from 3.1, the reduction of pressure, the humorous component of semantically unexpected substitutes and possibly the provocative attainment of pleasure that arises from the attraction of nearly saying something forbidden appear as additional aspects that accompany the straight use of the realm of aesthetics. The striving for pleasure and for the reduction of aggressivity through swearing accompanies straight use. (i/iii) Euphemisms from the field of social politics can also be employed in a playing-with-fire manner, and this applies especially for insults. When someone with racist intentions insults a person of colour by using a politically correct euphemism instead of, for instance, the N-word, the offending intention, probably underlined by paralinguistic parameters such as intonation or gestures, becomes clear enough even though the taboo word is not uttered. Here, the fear of social sanctions might contribute to sticking to the politically correct form instead of carrying out the violent verbal punch. More twisted examples of that kind are possible not only for race, but also for disability, age, sexual identity, or low social prestige, leading again to a dysphemistic twist that employs the sarcastic style of humour. (i/iv) Playing-with-fire euphemism use from the sphere of amorality manifests itself, for instance, if a threat like *Take care that your house doesn’t catch fire – you don’t want to be collateral damage* is uttered instead of *Be careful or I’ll set your house on fire and kill you*. The indirect wording hides the death threat to a certain degree and can, again, contribute not only to the verbal reduction of aggressivity but also to a (cruel) attainment of pleasure through indirect speech on the speaker’s side. The intention to hurt the target of this message corresponds, again, with the sarcastic dimension of humour.

#### *Innuendo euphemisms beyond aesthetics*

The motive of surprise and the functions of providing an intellectual stimulus to recipients and thereby entertaining them, characteristic for twisted euphemisms from the sphere of aesthetics, also make it possible to understand allusive twists

from other fields. (ii/i) Innuendo of a less bawdy kind than sexual allusion can appear in the field of religion, when the topic of death is treated not only euphemistically but above all aesthetically. As an example, we cite the opening verses of a poem by Dylan Thomas:

- (12) Do not go gentle into that good night  
 Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.  
 (Thomas 1988:148)

*Going into that good night*, the *close of day* and the *dying of the light* all represent death/dying; the conceptualisation of death as SLEEP or NIGHT does not only comply with straight use, it also gives the reader the task of decoding the metaphors, which results in entertainment, although the kind of entertainment is fundamentally different and certainly less funny than in sexual punning. Just as in Section 3.2, irony plays a role, too, since the allusions to death might not be directly understandable. Other euphemisms referring to death and dying reflect the humorous dimension of fun more obviously, among them digital metaphors from English such as *he saw the blue screen* ‘he died’ (see Benczes & Burrige 2018:76) or “[f]amiliar and usually jocular euphemisms” (Kany 1960:24) such as Sp. *la flaca* ‘the skinny one’, *la huesada* ‘the bony one’ or *la ñata* ‘the flat-nosed one’, which, beyond being funny, might also “help to defuse the anxieties surrounding death” (Benczes & Burrige 2018:76). Humorous nicknames for illness such as Germ. *rückwärts frühstücken* ‘to throw up’, literally ‘to breakfast backwards’ show that euphemistic humour can be “used as a means of coming to terms with the less happy aspects of our existence” (Allan & Burrige 1991:173). (ii/iii, ii/iv) Straight euphemisms from the fields of social politics and amorality can be used for entertainment as well, since political correctness, minorities, politics, economy, warfare, etc. are standard topics of comedy and political satire.

### *Mocking euphemisms beyond social politics*

The motive of affection and the functions of comforting and cheering up were introduced for the teasing subtype of twisted euphemisms from the realm of social politics, whereas the motive of aggressivity and the functions of ridicule, insult and provocation were highlighted for the demeaning subtype of twisted euphemisms from the same field. Straight euphemisms from other fields with these characteristics can be (abusively) twisted for mockery, too. (iii/i) If, for example, the expression It. *non è più tra noi* ‘he/she is no longer among us’ for *è morto* ‘he/she is dead’ (see Reutner 2009:47) is used with an obviously demeaning intention, it loses its euphemistic value: the feigned grief defeats the purpose

of mutual respect and face-saving, instead making fun of those who really are in grief. Similarly, the euphemistic Fr. *quelque chose lui est arrivée* ‘something happened to him’ for *il a été tué* ‘he has been killed’ can gain a strongly depreciating and mocking value if uttered by the victim’s murderer. Regarding diseases, mocking cancer patients through the ridiculing use of Engl. *the big C* or It. *Ca* or *K* for ‘cancer’ (see Mulcahy 2016, Serianni 2005: 263) might result in an insult. The humorous style present in these examples thus is sarcasm. (iii/ii) For the sphere of aesthetics, mockery can easily take place when sex-related euphemisms are used in a twisted way. Especially male genitalia are a classic realm of sexual mockery, which gives the euphemistic Fr. *carotte* ‘carrot’ for ‘penis’ mocking potential, as for example in expressions like *ta petite carotte* ‘your small carrot’ (see Delvau 1874, s.v. *carotte*). Mockery in this field can potentially be both gently teasing and demeaning, thereby covering both the benevolent and the sarcastic style. (iii/iv) Finally, euphemisms from the field of amorality have mocking potential, too: if the head of personnel tells a disliked employee in a scornful voice that he will encounter “a career-changing opportunity” when firing him, the expression that is already obfuscating in straight use turns into demeaning sarcastic mockery (example inspired by Allan 2012: 14). The same expression might also (and more positively) be used for comforting benevolent mockery in other contexts.

#### *Idealistic euphemisms beyond amorality*

The motive of protesting obfuscating language use and certain realities and the function of uncovering and criticising this use as well as the negative realities behind it were established for twisted euphemisms from the field of amorality. They are also present when straight euphemisms from other fields are idealistically twisted. (iv/i) In the field of religion, expressions from straight use can be employed idealistically with the aim of criticising the fear of naming death and diseases directly. This may be accompanied by a general criticism of religion or superstition that the speaker might perceive as negative and useless, especially when a mythologically or religiously inspired conception of evil-bringing language use has usually long been replaced by a more rational and scientific perspective on death and diseases in Western societies. (iv/ii) In the sphere of aesthetics, idealistic euphemism use can be similarly deconstructing. Considering that “[s]ex is a very human activity, and nothing human ought to be alien – that is, hidden, unspoken, pocketed away” (Epstein 1985: 62), the speaker’s motive of giving straight sex-related euphemisms an idealistic twist might be, for example, to criticise not only the euphemisation itself but, more importantly, the underlying embarrassment that often accompanies sexuality and leads to a euphemisation perceived as unnecessary by the speaker. The same can apply, for example, to

the domain of menstruation, where the speaker, striving to reduce the menstruation taboo, could use straight euphemisms idealistically to uncover the absurdity of embarrassment and euphemisation as well as to encourage people to speak non-euphemistically about menstruation. (iv/iii) In the field of social politics, the deconstruction could aim at euphemistically enhancing job names that try to raise the status of low prestige jobs. For instance, idealistically using It. *paramedico* ‘paramedic’ for *infermiere* ‘male nurse’ (Reutner 2009: 363) to refer to an underpaid hospital employee might underline that euphemistic expressions for low prestige jobs are not a huge improvement if only the language changes but economic circumstances do not. Just as in the realm of amorality, idealistically twisted euphemism use in the other three fields can thus be understood as an appeal to call things by their name without unnecessarily using obscuring or deceptive euphemisms.

#### 4. Conclusion

In the sections above, we tried to show what happens when humour (in a very broad sense) is linked to euphemism use on the illocutionary level. Reutner’s typology (2009) with its four fields led us to four types of twisted euphemism use: fate-tempting and provocative playing-with-fire euphemisms from the realm of religion (Section 3.1), entertaining innuendo euphemisms from the field of aesthetics (Section 3.2), gently teasing or demeaning mocking euphemisms from the sphere of social politics (Section 3.3), and deconstructing idealistic euphemisms from the field of amorality (Section 3.4). We developed the four prototypical twisted types based on the straight types and demonstrated that variations of all twisted types and fields are possible (Section 3.5).

Our observations resulted in a typology of humorously twisted euphemism use. Table 3 shows that this typology consists of two groups. The first group maintains the aspects of straight use but adds new qualities that challenge straight use without reversing it (marked by light grey fields, that complement the aspects of the white fields). This symbiotic relationship between the humorously twisted and the straight use applies to playing-with-fire and innuendo euphemisms as well as to the teasing subtype of mocking euphemisms. The second group does not maintain straight use: while imitating it on the locutionary level, twisted use here replaces the straight aspects with new characteristics on the illocutionary level. In this case, the twisted use is not a subtype of the straight use but rather its reversal (marked by dark grey fields, that substitute the aspects of the white fields). This parasitic relation between humorously twisted use and straight use applies to demeaning mocking euphemisms and to idealistic euphemisms. All twisted

types have in common that they are motivated by the human striving for amusement and distraction and thus function as a means for gaining pleasure and relief (marked by medium grey fields).

**Table 3.** Typology of twisted euphemism use in relation to straight euphemism use

Field	I	II	III	IV
	Playing-with-fire euphemism		Mocking euphemism	
Twisted use		Innuendo euphemism	Teasing mockery	Demeaning mockery Idealistic euphemism
anchoring	religion	aesthetics	social politics	amorality
speaker intention	maintenance of the connection to reality			'survival of the fittest' morality obscuration of the connection to reality
origins	mythological-religious conception of language	striving for mutual respect and self-respect		social rejection of certain realities
			rejection of mutual respect	disapproval of certain realities
			rejection of misleading language use	
		consideration of others		striving for profit and prestige
motives	respect and fear	decency, sense of tact, sense of shame, fear, striving for distinction	strengthening of social prestige, political correctness	protest against obfuscating language and certain realities
	careful fearlessness, inner stress	wish to surprise	affection	aggressivity
	striving for amusement and distraction			

Table 3. (continued)

Field	I	II	III	IV
	Playing- with-fire euphemism	Innuendo euphemism	Mocking euphemism	
Twisted use			Teasing mockery	Demeaning mockery Idealistic euphemism
	protection against supernatural forces	sparing of others, expression of the speaker's refinement, protection from social stigmatization	protection and enhancement of minorities, social empowerment of the speaker and of others	deception, manipulation, face-saving
functions				criticism of language use
	provocation, valve	intellectual stimulus, entertainment	comfort, cheering up	ridicule, insult, provocation uncovering of obfuscating language use and negative realities
	attainment of pleasure and relief			
topics	faith, superstition, magic, diseases and death	sexuality, female cycle, body parts, scatology	race, disability, age, sexual identity, low social prestige	politics, economy, financial system, warfare

All four twisted types are connected to humour that differs however in style: in the examples above, wit, nonsense and cynicism appear together with playing-with-fire euphemisms. The allusive innuendo euphemisms are accompanied by fun, nonsense, and irony as prominent styles of humour. Mocking euphemisms of the gentle subtype employ benevolent humour, whereas demeaning mockery uses sarcasm to hurt others. The examples of idealistic euphemisms were characterized by cynicism, fun, and most significantly by satire. The different types of humorous euphemism use go along with specific motives and functions that complement those of their straight counterparts in symbiotic twists or replace them in the parasitic ones. Regarding playing-with-fire euphemisms, careful fearlessness and the wish to reduce inner stress are added to the straight motives, provocation and the safety valve function to the straight functions. As to innuendo euphemisms, the wish to surprise complements the straight motives so that entertainment and intellectual stimulation of the recipients are additionally included in twisted use. Regarding teasing mocking euphemisms, affection complements the straight motives and leads to comforting and cheering up as added functions,



while with regard to demeaning mocking euphemisms the underlying aggressivity rejects the straight motives so that the twisted functions of ridicule, insult, provocation and criticism of language use replace the straight ones. The situation is similar for idealistic euphemisms where the striving for profit and prestige is replaced by the protest against obfuscating language use and the concealing of negative realities, so that the straight functions are replaced by the criticism of obscuring language use and the uncovering of negative realities. Beyond the prototypical assignments, we hinted at possible variations that allow a generalisation of the four twisted types (see Table 2).

As euphemisms are highly context dependent and as all expressions from straight use are generally twistable, it might sometimes be difficult to decide whether euphemism use is twisted or not. If two recipients interpret an utterance differently, the same expression in the same situation can be both twisted and straight at the same time on the perlocutionary level. The interpretation might potentially be easier when dealing with originally twisted euphemisms insofar as they leave less space for ambiguous interpretation; nonetheless, situations where their use can be interpreted differently cannot be excluded either. And even if it seems obvious that a specific euphemism use is twisted, it remains difficult to decide for the symbiotic twisted use if the straight aspects or the twisted ones are of primary importance in a specific situation. Despite these potential problems of perlocutionary ambiguity, we can ultimately define twisted euphemism use as a manner of speech that (i) employs either twistable euphemisms from straight use or originally twisted pseudo-euphemisms on the locutionary level, that (ii), in contrast to straight use, adds different types of humour on the illocutionary level with the goal of attaining different kinds of pleasure and relief, and that (iii) maintains the euphemistic value of straight use in symbiotic twists and reverses this value in parasitic twists.

This approach to twisted euphemism use leaves several questions unanswered. Among them is the question of semantic change: it has often been recognized that euphemisms tend to lose their euphemistic force over time. It seems plausible that repeated twisted use can contribute to an expression's gradual 'de-euphemisation'. What needs to be further investigated is the question of whether and where we find empirical proof for this possibility. Moreover, we cannot exclude *a priori* that there are more ways to twist euphemisms; if plausible examples for other twists with different styles of humour appear, the typology needs to be extended. Lastly, our approach was purely qualitative; corpus-based studies with a quantitative focus would be helpful to estimate the impact of the twisted types, even if the difficulty of deciding whether euphemism use is twisted or not in a specific situation makes a quantification even more complicated. However, it could be possible with clearly defined indicators of twisted use (including co-

texts, contexts, intonation, and other paralinguistic parameters). Such indicators could also help to differentiate more clearly and more systematically not only between different types of euphemism use but also between euphemistic and non-euphemistic speech in general in order to answer the not yet fully resolved question of where euphemism use ends and where other uses begin.

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