

Conceptual Metaphors in Taboo-Induced Lexical Variation

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ABSTRACT

Taboo is deeply woven into every culture and society, which is obviously reflected in vocabulary. Indeed, taboo keeps language users from avoiding the forbidden concept and compels them to preserve or violate it, which leads to endless series of cross varietal synonyms for forbidden concepts. In this process, though metaphor stands out as a potent source for euphemistic and dysphemistic reference, the analysis of conceptual metaphor in the Lakoffian tradition as a X-phemistic device has not been dealt with in depth so far. In this regard, the main aim of this paper is twofold: to gain an insight into the process of metaphorical X-phemistic lexical replacements triggered by taboo and explore the role the process of lexicalization of metaphorical units plays in sex and death-related X-phemistic vocabulary. The analysis undertaken demonstrates that whereas lexicalized metaphorical units are deprived of their capacity to conceptualize the taboo in particular terms, both semi-lexicalized and creative metaphors suit the purpose of euphemism and dysphemism by conceptualizing a taboo topic within a conceptual network, which accounts for the X-phemistic function of metaphorical items.

1. Introduction

Taboo is deeply woven into every culture and society. It is an omnipresent phenomenon, consubstantial with human nature and far from being just a relic of the Dark Ages of the past; rather, taboo is very alive and keeps its force intact in our so-called modern and industrialized societies.

The power of taboo has its obvious reflection in vocabulary. Indeed, taboo keeps language users from avoiding the forbidden concept and compels them to preserve or violate it, which leads to endless series of cross varietal synonyms for the verbalization of forbidden concepts. As Burridge (2004: 212) puts it, taboo “provides a fertile seedbed for words to flourish – and the more potent the taboo, the richer the growth”. This is part of the paradoxical nature of the taboo: we need to refer to the concepts themselves, no matter how much they are forbidden.

In the reference to taboo subjects, language users resort respectively either to *euphemism* (i.e. the process thanks to which the taboo is stripped of its most explicit or obscene overtones) or to *dysphemism* (i.e. the process whereby the most pejorative traits of the taboo are highlighted with an offensive aim to the addressee or to the concept itself). From this viewpoint, euphemism and dysphemism – *X-phemism*,¹ if we adopt the terminology proposed by Allan and Burridge – are not merely a response to a forbidden subject; rather, these processes provide a way to speak about the taboo, that is, about the unspeakable, about those concepts banned from public domain.

Given that metaphorization stands out as one of the most prolific devices of lexical generation, it is hardly surprising that speakers turn to figurative language as a means of coping with taboo topics. Metaphor thus plays a crucial role in the way we manage forbidden concepts and manipulate the taboo referent, insofar as it is at the user’s disposal to model the distasteful concept and present it without its pejorative overtones or, by contrast, with an intensification of its most unacceptable conceptual traits.² In this regard, metaphor stands out as a major device in structuring euphemism and dysphemism conceptually and therefore contributes to lexical variation³ in the different taboo areas in a decisive way.

The study of X-phemistic lexical variation along cognitive lines is a topic that, curiously enough, has received relatively little attention in scholarly literature. In fact, apart from my own contributions to the subject in the taboo areas of sex (2008) and death (2006 and 2011), few studies have analysed conceptual metaphor in the Lakoffian tradition as a purely euphemistic or dysphemistic device (Bultnick 1998; Chamizo Domínguez 2000; Herrero Ruiz 2009: 252–260). In this regard, the main aim of this paper is twofold: to gain an insight into the role conceptual metaphors play in the vocabulary triggered by taboo and analyse the process of lexicalization in sex and death-related figurative language. The choice for sex and death as taboo areas for the present paper is not at random. Though taboo subjects can vary widely, and they change along with our social attitudes and beliefs, the fact remains that sex and death have shown remarkable staying powers. In fact, both areas of interdiction constitute such a fascinating storehouse for metaphorical conceptualizations of attenuation and offense that Hughes (2000: 45) considers them “as universal areas of euphemism”.

As euphemisms and dysphemisms are highly dependent on context, this study is not based on isolated words, but on coherent and contextualized discourses extracted, unless otherwise stated, from *The British National Corpus* (hereafter *BNC*), a 100 million word collection of samples of written and spoken current British English. This contextualized study of lexical units derives from a usage-oriented onomasiological

approach, which, as Baldinger (q. in Geeraerts 2009: 653) argues, focuses on the “designations of a particular concept”, that is, the actual lexical choices for a given (in our case taboo) referent in a given situation.

This paper is structured as follows. After briefly dealing with the theoretical framework this study relies on and how figurative language manipulates taboo referents, I will analyse the role that the process of lexicalization plays in euphemistic and dysphemistic figurative language in the taboos area of sex and death. The conclusions and the final results obtained from the analysis will bring this study to an end.

2. Theoretical assumptions

As already mentioned, the theoretical assumptions on which the present study relies are derived from the well-known cognitive model of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (hereafter CMT), initially developed by Lakoff and Johnson in their seminal work *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). Lakoff and Johnson revealed the centrality of metaphor to thought taking as examples metaphorical forms in everyday language. They claimed that we talk about things the way we conceive them, and this is grounded in our experience and culture. From this standpoint, metaphor is defined as “a cross-domain mapping in the conceptual system” (Lakoff, 1993: 203); that is, a mapping or set of conceptual correspondences from a source domain (the realm of the physical or more concrete reality) to a target domain (the more abstract entity, in our case, sex and death-related concepts). The source domain is therefore used to understand, structure and, depending on the speaker’s intention, mitigate or reinforce the associations of a negative kind of the target domain.

Therefore, within the cognitive tradition, metaphor is understood as a device with the capacity to structure our conceptual system, providing, at the same time, a particular understanding of the world and a way to make sense of our experience. Hence, the metaphor is, as Lakoff and Turner (1989: xi) claim, rather than a linguistic expression or a figure of speech with an aesthetic value, a mode of thought and reason:

Far from being merely a matter of words, metaphor is a matter of thought – all kinds of thought: thought about emotion, about society, about human character, about language, and about the nature of life and death. It is indispensable not only to our imagination, but also to our reason.

Despite the close links between metaphors and X-phemistic processes, cognitive issues have been largely excluded from the study of euphemism and dysphemism, which have been analysed from different linguistic disciplines such as lexical semantics, sociolinguistics, rhetoric and, more recently, pragmatics (cf. Casas Gómez, 2009: 725-739). As euphemism and dysphemism can be accurately and insightfully described in terms of cognitive abilities, Casas Gómez has defined X-phemistic processes within the general framework of linguistic interdiction from a cognitive point of view. This scholar

considers euphemism and dysphemisms as “[t]he cognitive process of conceptualization of a forbidden reality, which, manifested in discourse through the use of linguistic mechanisms [...] enables the speaker, in a certain “context” or in a specific pragmatic situation, to attenuate, or, on the contrary, to reinforce a certain forbidden concept or reality” (2009: 738).

Following Casas Gómez’s definition of euphemism and dysphemism, taboo language can be insightfully studied according to the conceptual networks in which X-phemistic metaphors are included. Prior to moving to the analysis of X-phemistic metaphors types, I will move on now to the role conceptual metaphor plays in the manipulation of taboo topics.

3. The X-phemistic metaphorical manipulation of taboo

From the close connection between metaphor and the verbal mechanisms of mitigation and offence discussed in the previous sections, it seems evident that conceptual metaphor plays a crucial role in the way we manage taboo topics. In fact, metaphorical language is at the user’s disposal to model the taboo concept and present it without its most pejorative implications or, by contrast, intensifying those unacceptable conceptual traits with an offensive aim to the concept itself or to the audience.

The euphemistic or dysphemistic functions that metaphors perform can be illustrated in the metaphorical disguise that a taboo such as ‘coition’ may adopt in public domain. As part of the process of referent manipulation, this taboo would undergo a conceptual makeup in which the language user, depending on his or her intention, may resort to a euphemistic metaphorical substitute like *do the business* or to a dysphemistic metaphorical word such as *mount*. Consider the following examples:

- (1) I remember the first time we went to bed and ⁴*did the business*. (BNC: CGC, 1671)
- (2) Her fingers stroked my balls and her lips slid on my penis and in a few minutes, free to call her what I wished, I pulled her down and *mounted* her. (BNC: ADA, 2206)

The attenuating and offensive quality of the metaphorical realizations in these examples depend on the conceptual network to which they belong. *Business* with the meaning of ‘sexual intercourse’ is motivated by the euphemistic metaphor TO COPULATE IS TO WORK, whereas *mount* is included in a dysphemistic conceptualization which conceives sex in terms of horse-riding (cf. Crespo Fernández, 2008: 103-104). In this way, figurative language provides the speaker either with a linguistic safeguard or a verbal weapon respectively for presenting the forbidden concept in communication and determines, by so doing, the conceptual makeup of euphemism and dysphemism.

Both euphemistic and dysphemistic realizations used to refer to a taboo concept are motivated by the characteristics of a given conceptual network. However, the semantic considerations of each of these processes of conceptual make-up greatly differ. In

euphemistic metaphorical substitution, the word or expression chosen to tone down the concept shares certain conceptual traits with the linguistic taboo, though it moves away from its literal meaning with the purpose of reaching the lexical neutralization of the taboo referent. Neutralization is thus a key concept in the analysis of the euphemistic process, since it enables the adoption of new senses in lexical units by means of the temporal suspension of those conceptual traits considered inappropriate in social interaction. And the conceptualization of the taboo plays a crucial role in this process of neutralization. Indeed, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 10) in the metaphorical structuring of a given taboo concept the filter of metaphorical conceptualization through which a given topic is presented provides us with a partial understanding of the concept, masking (i.e. euphemism) or revealing (i.e. dysphemism) particular aspects of the topic being dealt with. For instance, the conceptualization A PROSTITUTE IS A WORKER, an extension of the above mentioned TO COPULATE IS TO WORK, is the source of metaphorical euphemistic labels like *working girl* ‘prostitute’ or *commerce* ‘sexual intercourse’, in which the values related to the consideration of the sexual activity in terms of a job are given priority, whereas the most explicitly related to sex are hidden; in this way, the euphemistic alternative is deprived of the heavily tabooed connotations of the concept.

In the neutralization of the taboo which characteristically operates in this process of euphemistic manipulation, the metaphor generates an ambiguity which suggests that there may be a distasteful concept underneath. Therefore, the semantic uncertainty of metaphor moves to euphemism and stands out as one of its main features as a linguistic phenomenon. As Burrige (2004: 224) puts it, “clearly, imprecision is what you want in a euphemism and the most successful euphemistic substitutions always involve very general expressions”. In this sense, for a euphemism to be effective, it must necessarily be more ambiguous than the taboo it aims at replacing. On the contrary, the offensive capacity of dysphemistic metaphors does not depend on ambiguity; rather, in the dysphemistic manipulation of the taboo referent, as is the case of the metaphorical term *mount* in (2), the pejorative power is kept intact because first, it is explicit with respect to its taboo referent; and second, because the conceptualization in which it is included (TO COPULATE IS HORSE-RIDING) dehumanizes the act of coition and implicitly conceives sexual partners – women in the example proposed – as animals.

The degree of lexicalization of the metaphorical item included in a particular X-phemistic conceptualization gives way to different types of lexical substitutes for taboo concepts. In what follows, I will analyse the different metaphor and X-phemistic types to consider when dealing with X-phemistic figurative language.

4. The lexicalization of X-phemistic metaphors

The euphemistic or dysphemistic quality of metaphorical items is greatly influenced by the degree of lexicalization of the linguistic substitute, that is, the extent to which the tabooed conceptual traits have become associated with the X-phemistic metaphorical

alternative. This process of lexicalization is not exclusive of taboo-induced figurative language, though. Indeed, many non metaphorical terms which were once considered as euphemisms faded from euphemisms to ortophemisms and, with the passing of time, degenerated into dysphemisms through contamination by the taboo topic. There are many examples of this process of euphemistic treadmill, a law of semantic change whereby “bad connotations drive out good” (Burridge, 2004: 213). This process is especially noteworthy in the so-called PC language, as pointed out by Allan and Burridge (2006: 99-100). Take, for example, the word *backward* to refer to poor countries. Through contamination by the taboo connotations of mental illness, it degenerated into a dysphemism in the late 1940s and had to be replaced by *underdeveloped* in the 1950s, a word free at that time from the negative associations of the taboo until the 1960s, when people needed a more positive word like *emerging* to refer to poor countries in a socially acceptable way. This adjective was in turn later replaced by a noun phrase like *Third World* and more recently by another label with a greater degree of ambiguity as *the South* (Ayto, 2007: 286-287).

Similarly, the degree of lexicalization of the metaphorical alternative to the taboo referent leads to a multiplicity of X-phemistic alternatives, differing in their in their degree of ambiguity (and, therefore, in their euphemistic or dysphemistic capacity), which are generated by different types of metaphors. The classification proposed here is based on the one put forward by Chamizo Domínguez and Sánchez Benedito (2000). These scholars distinguish three types of euphemisms and dysphemisms according to their degree of lexicalization: *lexicalized* (those in which the figurative meaning is regarded as the normal or literal meaning); *semi-lexicalized* (the metaphorical substitute is associated with the taboo because of its inclusion in a conceptual domain traditionally tied to the forbidden concept); and *creative* (the euphemistic or dysphemistic item is the result of a novel association with the taboo, only accessible in its phraseological context). It must be noted that as metaphors are so closely connected with euphemisms, Chamizo (1998: 47–70) had already applied this distinction to metaphorical language, distinguishing three types of metaphors: lexicalized or dead, semi-lexicalized and poetic or creative metaphors.

The different metaphor types motivated by the process of lexicalization (lexicalized, semi-lexicalized and creative) give rise to their corresponding X-phemistic metaphorical substitutes (explicit, conventional and novel), as graphically shown in the figure below in relation to the taboo topics ‘reach orgasm’ and ‘die’:

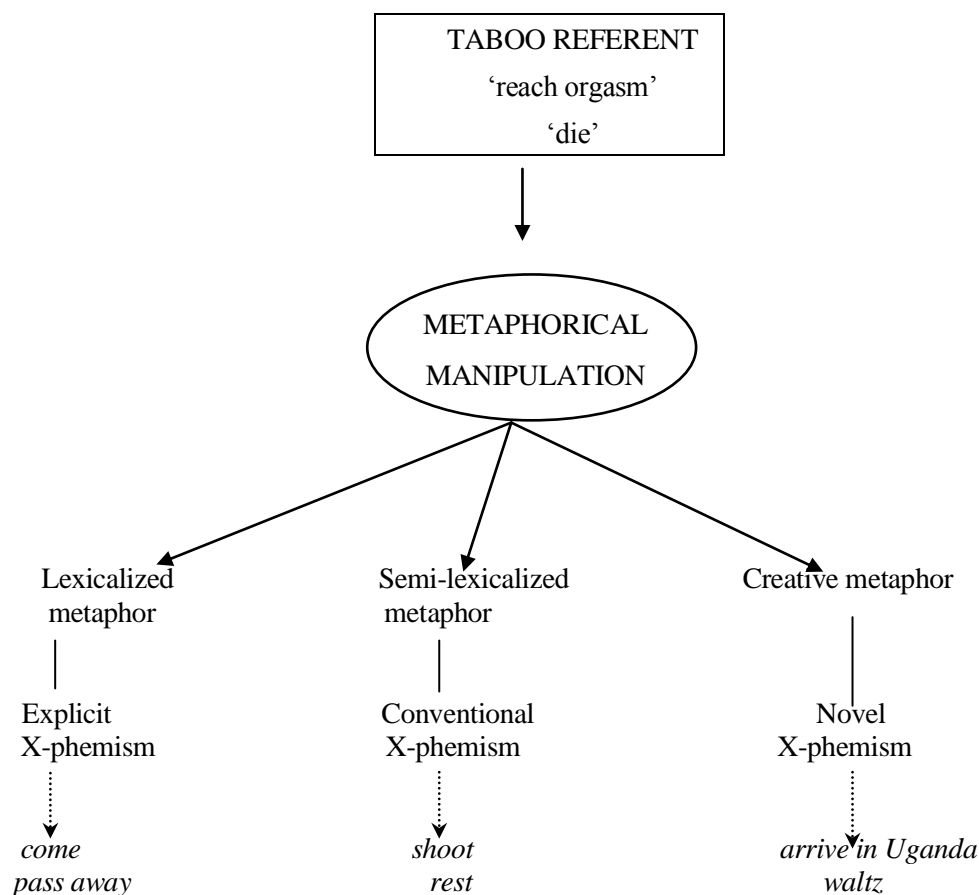


Figure 1. Metaphor types and X-phemistic categories.

The effect of metaphorical language on taboo topics such as ‘reach orgasm’ and ‘die’ is the source of three types of X-phemistic substitutes, lexicalized in different degrees and included in different conceptual networks. In the figure above, the taboos proposed as examples are verbalized through metaphorical units which show different degrees of ambiguity and connection with the taboo referent. In what follows I will discuss the different metaphor types, namely creative, semi-lexicalized and lexicalized, and their corresponding X-phemistic categories: novel, conventional and explicit.

4.1. Creative metaphors and novel X-phemism

Metaphorical units motivated by creative metaphors activate a novel meaning with respect to the sense generally accepted for the expression. This is why the identification of these X-phemistic types with the taboo referent they stand for is not at all obvious. Indeed, the meaning of novel X-phemisms is only accessible in their phraseological and pragmatic context, where they acquire their X-phemistic power and capacity to refer figuratively to the taboo referent. On many occasions they even have meaning only to those familiar in

their context. This is why metaphorical novel X-phemism allocates referents not found in a word's dictionary description in the vast majority of cases. These novel X-phemisms are referred to as "event-based" by Keyes (2010: 25–28) insofar as these X-phemistic units "enjoy the life expectancy of a fruit fly. Most die out with the memory of those around at their inception, if not sooner". From this it can be deduced that the process of lexicalization of novel X-phemistic units with the taboo sense has not even started. Consider the following epitaph excerpted from Highgate Cemetery in London:

(3) To Ether, forever *waltzing*.

Here death is seen in terms of a dance, so a non conventional connection is established between human mortality and a joyful activity like that of a dance. Therefore the source domain of dancing is used to reason about a radically different target domain, that of death, which makes the connection rather shocking. As there is no apparent connection between these domains whatsoever, the death related reference of waltzing can be only understood in the context in which it appears, that of an epitaph. This word activates its euphemistic sense and consolatory function on the basis that dancing is a physical activity which obviously requires movement. This leads to the assumption – needless to say, utterly absurd from a logical point of view – that the deceased is capable of moving and is somehow alive and happy.

As could not be otherwise, creative metaphors are also responsible for the lexical generation of novel X-phemistic metaphorical words and phrases in the realm of sex. Take, for example, the X-phemistic unit *discuss Uganda*, which first appeared in the late 1970s as a way to refer implicitly (and humorously) to an illicit sexual encounter.⁵ This X-phemistic alternative to the act of coition was rather popular at that time, and led to other novel X-phemistic units like *Ugandan affairs*, *Ugandan discussions*, *Ugandan practices* and even *East-African activities* as substitutes for 'coition' and *Uganda virus* as an alternative to 'venereal disease'. Here we can see an example of how a novel X-phemism has given way to different ways to refer to sex-related issues. By virtue of this alternative way of comprehending sex, *arrive in Uganda* would hypothetically correspond to the act of reaching orgasm, conceptualizing the sexual climax as the end-point of a journey within a creative metaphor which could be referred to as TO COPULATE IS TO DISCUSS UGANDA. Though Chamizo Domínguez and Sánchez Benedito (2000: 308), cannot take it for granted that the once euphemistic reference to sex *discuss Uganda* has led to the formation of a conceptual network, in my opinion the lexical variation that this phrase generated, as commented before, and its presence in lexicographic sources⁶, leads me to think that the process of lexicalization started when the expression was coined and formed a conceptual network to comprehend (and talk about) sexual topics in a humorous way,⁷ which is still active nowadays. In fact, in a very recent post on the Internet taken from a British football forum in September 2011, the noun phrase *Ugandan discussions* is sufficient to introduce sexual connotations where they otherwise did not exist:

- (4) – Former Hibernian and Kilmarnock manager Bobby Williamson will make history today if his Uganda side avoid defeat in Angola as they will reach their first African Cup of Nations finals in 34 years. (*Scotland on Sunday*)
- Uganda will qualify for the finals if they beat Kenya at home in their final match next month. [...] Bobby is a hero out there already.
 - I remember at one stage there was a big furore about Bobby being pressured to sign a declaration that condemned homosexuals.
 - It's good to have *Ugandan discussions*.
 - *Discussing Uganda* with Bobby Williamson, though. Nooooooooooooooooooooo. (<www.pasoti.co.uk/talk/viewtopic.php?f=17&t=57948>).

Novel X-phemistic metaphorical items arise everyday in both private and public domains.⁸ Social and professional groups have their own X-phemistic words and phrases which are rather flippant and humorous in many cases. I came across a few X-phemistic labels that were posted in a blog in 2007 by David Terrenoire, an American novelist, to refer to sexual issues taking vocabulary from the field of writing. Some of them are *sharpening the pencil* 'getting prepared for sexual intercourse', *simultaneous submissions* 'committing adultery' or *pounding the old keyboard* 'masturbating', among others.⁹ The creativity of these ludic X-phemistic labels proves that language is alive and its users are remarkably inventive. Of course, one cannot foresee whether novel X-phemistic units will ever become integrated into conceptual networks and new conventional X-phemistic words and expressions will arise to refer to taboo topics or they simply have meaning only for those familiar with them.

4.2. Semi-lexicalized metaphors and conventional X-phemism

In conventional X-phemism the metaphorical reference to the taboo is accepted by the majority of language users and becomes the norm in the speech community. The X-phemistic unit, however, has not been yet fully lexicalized, and maintains its literal sense, which coexists with the figurative one for euphemistic or dysphemistic reference. In this way, a word like *shoot* to refer to the act of ejaculating offers an alternative way of comprehending reality by virtue of the conceptualization SEX IS WAR. The figurative meaning of the word is a screen through which the concept is seen and understood and, in this particular case, used with a dysphemistic purpose. Take the following example:

- (5) The creature he'd coupled with, almost *shot his load* into, didn't even share her sex. (*BNC: CRE, 2263*)

The metaphorical term *shot* is included in a conceptualization which transfers different attributes from the source domain of war to the target domain of sex. More precisely, it presents different sets of ontological correspondences as a result of using the knowledge we have about war to talk about the taboo of sex; for instance, the lover is the enemy, to seduce the sexual partner is to overcome an enemy, the penis is a weapon, etc. The

conceptual basis for war metaphors responds to an overall view of sex in terms of hostility, violence and dominance; accordingly, because of this conception of sex as a violent act, many of the metaphorical substitutes that fall under this conceptual network tend to acquire dysphemistic overtones, as happens in (3). This tradition of equating sex with violence dates back to Elizabethan literature and constitutes the source of a remarkable diversity of sex-related language (cf. Partridge 1968: 23). As many of the metaphors people ordinarily use to talk about reality, the SEX-AS-WAR metaphor is one of the conceptualizations included in the “wealth of conceptual metaphors that they [sc. people] use to make sense of their experience”, as Lakoff and Turner (1989: 109) argue.

Semi-lexicalized metaphors are the source of a considerable diversity of conventional euphemistic language. For example, the consolatory metaphorical term *rest* is included in the conceptual network DEATH IS A REST, which conceptualizes human mortality as a peaceful rest.¹⁰ The consolation that provides this metaphor lies on the fact that rest is temporary and death is therefore implicitly understood as a temporary event, which ultimately leads to the denial of human mortality, the same as happens with other lexical units included in this cognitive equation like *sleep*. Besides, as Herrero Ruiz (2007: 64) notes, the consolatory power of this metaphor is also motivated by the fact that the deceased is laid to rest peacefully, far from troubles, which are left behind. From this perspective, the rest is not only physical, but also psychological. This euphemism for death as a means for consolation appears in the following case:

- (6) When she died, he was so heartbroken that he made sure he would share her final *resting* place at the Downs Crematorium in Bear Road when he, too, was laid *to rest*. (BNC: CBF, 4963)

Rest and *resting* are terms which have not been contaminated by the taboo topic, at least not yet. This is the reason why in a conventional euphemistic word like *rest* both meanings are at play: the literal sense of the word and the evocation of the taboo referent which is understood in terms of the conceptualization it belongs to.

Obviously, not all semi-lexicalized metaphors generate euphemistic units with the same degree of ambiguity and euphemistic capacity. Take the example that follows, excerpted from John Cleland’s *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, a novel which can be considered a breeding ground for sex-related euphemism:

- (7) The *die-away moment* was come upon him, which she gave signs of joining with, by the wild throwing of her hands about, closing her eyes, and giving a deep sob, in which she seemed to *expire in an agony of bliss*. (Cleland, p. 31)

In this case, the taboo of reaching orgasm is conceptualized through a conceptual metaphor which equates orgasm with death. The death reference to the sexual climax is not immediate because it is not based on pre-existing metaphorical associations which may form part of the reader’s cognitive system (Lakoff 1994: 210), as is the case of those metaphorical terms included in more conventional sex-related conceptualizations, like, for

example, SEX IS WAR, already discussed, SEX IS FOOD or SEX IS A GAME (cf. Crespo Fernández, 2008). The verb *die* is lexicalized with a sexual meaning in the *OED2* as “To experience a sexual orgasm (most common as a poetic metaphor in the late 16th and 17th cent)”. The greater ambiguity of this substitute in the reference to the taboo concept than other conventional X-phemistic units derives from the fact that this metaphorical term, and others included in the same conceptual network, was commonly employed, as the *OED2* states, as a poetic metaphor in literature to deal with sexual issues,¹¹ and the sexual meaning of the verb *die* has become obsolete in modern usage (cf. Ayto 2007: 80).

4.3. Lexicalized metaphors and explicit X-phemism

Contrary to novel and most conventional X-phemistic substitutes, the explicit X-phemistic alternative undoubtedly refers to the taboo referent it stands for. Explicit X-phemistic words reached the last stages in the process of lexicalization of metaphorical units, after which the lexical unit is deprived of its capacity to refer figuratively to the taboo due to its close association – not to say identification – with the sexual concept that it names. When this happens, the metaphorical units become tainted and thus require replacement. There are many examples of words which have undergone this process of lexicalization in the sexual taboo, which has led to polysemy whereby the taboo and non-taboo senses coexist. Though the taboo sense usually becomes more prominent and tends to leave out the literal sense of the word, not many polysemous words have totally lost their original meaning.¹² This explains why the ambiguity of these words tends to disappear gradually over time. As Allan and Burrige (1991: 23) put it, “[t]here is wealth of evidence that where a language expression is ambiguous between a taboo sense and a non-taboo sense, its meaning will often narrow to the taboo sense alone”. Take, for example, the word *cock* to refer to the sexual male organ. This coarse word, originally an animal metaphor with the meaning of ‘adult male chicken’¹³, was first used with a sexual sense (‘penis’) in the early seventeenth century (*OED2*). This once metaphorical term has taken on sexual connotations as a consequence of its frequent use to refer to the sexual male organ, and *cock* is now regarded by the *OED2* as “the current name [sc. for penis] among the people, but *pudoris causa*, not admissible in polite speech or literature”. Consider the following example:

- (8) Next time you want to get your *cock* into me, Leo, why don’t you leave kid sister at home? (*BNC*: FNT, 4301)

The lexicalized metaphorical term *cock* does not offer an alternative way of comprehending reality. In fact, granted that nobody would think of a connection of *cock* with a male domestic fowl in the example above, this word is unable to frame the taboo topic in a particular conceptual sphere and consequently does not provide a particular way of understanding (or mitigating) the sexual concept. The term does provide a way to refer to the tabooed body part in a colloquial register like that of (8), but not to reason about it, as happens in conceptual categorization. Indeed, in the case of *cock*, it is the sexual organ that first comes to mind.

Another case that it is worth mentioning is the once euphemistic word *come*, whose first occurrence with the sense of ‘experience sexual orgasm’ dates back to 1650 (*OED2*). Through the conceptual metaphor AN ORGASM IS THE END OF A JOURNEY, the sexual climax is seen in terms of the end-point of a journey. Here, by virtue of the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL Schema into which our everyday experience may be organized (Lakoff 1987: 275), a sexual encounter is understood as a process with a starting, an end point and a time span. This, in turn, implies that an orgasm is conceptualized as the final stage of the sexual encounter, the end-point of the journey. Take the example that follows:

- (9) The tubes through which sperm travel from the testes to the penis are cut or blocked so that sperm can no longer enter the semen that is ejaculated when the man ‘comes’.
(*BNC*: AOJ, 501)

As happens with *cock* in (8), nobody would think of a connection of *come* with the end of a journey whatsoever in (9). In the lexicalized metaphorical words *cock* and *come*, the sexual connotations of the words have overlapped their literal meanings; therefore, both are inevitably linked to the sexual taboo and refer to the male sexual organ and to the sexual climax respectively in an undeviating way. *Cock* and *come* are thus felt as coarse words, contaminated by the taboo topics they denote and totally inappropriate in polite conversation – this is the reason why it is quoted in a formal register like that of (9) –, like many other sex-related words which have lost their once euphemistic or ortophemistic nature, like *bitch* ‘lewd woman’ (literally ‘the female of the dog’), a word included in the dysphemistic conceptualization WOMEN ARE ANIMALS, or *intercourse* ‘coition’, which belongs to the euphemistic conceptual network SEX IS COMMERCE. All these fully lexicalized words with a sexual sense have not totally lost (at least yet) their original literal meaning; rather, they have acquired a taboo sense which coexists with the non-taboo sense, leading to taboo-induced polysemy.

The lexicalization of once ortophemistic or euphemistic metaphorical words with a taboo sense has considerably affected lexis: indeed, many homonyms of taboo terms have been abandoned as a consequence of their connection with the forbidden concept and the possible ambiguity between the taboo sense and the non taboo sense. This has happened because the ambiguity between the taboo and non taboo senses may arise when using certain words in communication and may put the speaker in an embarrassing situation if the sexual sense is not intended. Though in British English *cock* persists with the meaning of ‘rooster’, in American English, because of the taboo homonym meaning ‘penis’, this sense of *cock* started to disappear in the early nineteenth century and is nowadays very rare in Australian English (cf. Allan and Burridge 2006: 44–45). The lexicalization of this metaphorical word has also affected words containing *cock*, like *weather-vane* as an alternative to *weather-cock* and *haystack* instead of *haycock*, though it is still present in *stopcock* and *ballcock* (Allan and Burridge 1991: 105ff).

It is worthy of note that this contamination of once innocent terms is not exclusive of English. In Spanish the coarse word *polla* ‘penis’, is a bird metaphor for the male sexual organ. Its literal meaning, ‘young hen’, has been virtually abandoned, and the taboo sense

has contaminated the literal non-taboo sense. In fact, when using the word *polla* in Spanish, the sexual sense dominates. Because of this contamination with the sexual concept, people will not risk being misunderstood, so when using *polla* in the non-sexual sense they would certainly avoid this word and choose others free from sexual connotations.

Words and phrases from the taboo area of death have been also lexicalized, though in this area the process of lexicalization affects the axiology of the word in a different way. Take for example the expression *pass away*, an old euphemism which dates back to the fourteenth century (Ayto 2007: 234). In this explicit euphemistic verb which refers to the act of dying the taboo figurative sense is more salient than the literal sense of the verb,¹⁴ the same as happened in the sexual taboo. However, despite being closely connected with the taboo topic it stands for, *pass away* constitutes a euphemistic alternative to the straightforward reference to the taboo. It has not been, for the time being, contaminated by the taboo topic it denotes and stands as a common way to refer to the act of dying showing respect towards the deceased, his or her family and towards the subject of death itself, as happens in the following example:

- (10) Unfortunately, the injection did not work and despite much medication to calm his heart, he *passed away* in the early hours of the morning. (BNC: A17, 1131)

The euphemistic intention of *pass away* is clear in the context of this example. Therefore, and in spite of the fact that this expression has lost its ambiguity and refers to the death taboo in an undeviating way, it can be considered as a consolatory metaphorical verb. Its euphemistic meaning derives from its inclusion in the conceptualization DEATH IS A JOURNEY, source of many other death-related euphemistic substitutes like *go*, *leave*, *depart*, *pass on*, etc. (cf. Crespo Fernández 2011: 207–212) which aim at assisting those left alive in coping with the pain of loss. The underlying notion of these consolatory metaphors is that the deceased corresponds to the person who has been capable of embarking on a journey, and, for this reason, is considered somehow alive.

Using metaphors with a lexicalized meaning in discourse has an important consequence for one of the basic aspects of the standard CMT approach, the principle of unidirectionality, according to which the associative process invariably goes from the source domain to the target domain: “[M]apping in metaphor is always *unidirectional*: only the source is projected onto the target domain, and the target domain is not at the same time mapped onto the source domain” (Barcelona 2003: 114). However, as I demonstrated in a previous article (Crespo Fernández 2009) not always are metaphorical projections unidirectional. In metaphorical units in which the figurative meaning has been lexicalized and has replaced the original meaning, the target domain may be projected onto the source domain. In words like *come*, *cock* or *pansy*, as the tabooed conceptual traits have progressively become an integral part in the reference of the word, the sexual taboo will activate, either consciously or not, in the interpretation of such terms. Consider the following online conversation in the form of posted messages, taken from an Internet forum:

(11) Do you know any technique to make me *come* again?

Answer 1: Masturbation.

Answer 2: You mean arrive? Eat more carbs and what a day I guess?

(<<http://answers.yahoo.com/>>)

The verb *come* has been lexicalized with the meaning of ‘reach orgasm’, as discussed before. In (8), through the conceptual metaphor AN ORGASM IS THE END OF A JOURNEY, the source domain of journeys is projected onto the sexual target domain and is used to reason about it in terms of a more concrete domain of experience, as the principle of unidirectionality maintains, which is not the case in (11). In this online conversation, by virtue of the process of lexicalization undergone by *come*, the initial projection from the source domain of journeys onto the taboo target domain of sex is extended to a metaphorical projection from the target to the source domains, giving way to a redescription of the latter in terms of the sexual connotations evoked by the former. This metaphorical interpretation provides the basis for considering *come* in the first answer of (11) an asymmetric metaphor (Goatly 1997: 128), as the hearer interprets the word metaphorically though there is no metaphorical intention on the part of the speaker.

By mapping knowledge about journeys or other non taboo domain onto knowledge about a reality from the realm of sex, the more abstract or ‘innocent’ domain may become contaminated because of its connection with the reality expressed by the taboo and may be ultimately felt as part of the target domain. This is also the case of the following Spanish joke:

(12) Un abuelo iba al mercado cargado con una cesta de huevos para vender. Por el camino, tropezó, haciendo una buena tortilla con los huevos. El hombre empezó a lamentarse:

– “Dios, ¿qué hago ahora? ¿Qué dirá mi mujer? ¡Yo me cuelgo, me cuelgo!”

Una mujer que pasaba por allí, le dice:

– “¿Por los huevos?”

– “¡No, hombre, no! ¡Por el pescuezo!” responde el abuelo.

[An old man set off for the market with a basket full of eggs to sell. Along the way, he stumbled and all the eggs broke. The man started to moan:

– “For God’s sake, what can I do now? What is my wife going to say? I will hang myself!”

A woman who was walking by asked him:

– “Because of the eggs?”¹⁵

– “No way! From the neck!” answered the old man”] (My translation)

In this case, the taboo sense of the Spanish word *huevos* ‘eggs’ (lexicalized with the meaning of ‘testicles’ in the *Spanish Dictionary of the Real Academia*) has led to a sexual interpretation of a word belonging to the semantic field of food by virtue of the

metaphor FOOD IS SEX. This extension of meaning is the effect of using in discourse lexicalized metaphorical units included in the metaphor SEX IS FOOD. Indeed, in this joke the woman is misunderstood by the old man because the sexual meaning of the word *eggs* dominates the interpretation of the word.

These examples prove that when focusing on the use in communication of certain lexicalized linguistic realizations of a given conceptual metaphor, the mapping of knowledge from the source domain onto the target domain can be somehow considered as *bidirectional*. Words lexicalized with a sexual meaning like *come* or *huevos*, for example, may acquire connotations that, in some contexts, carry over to the non-metaphorical referents. The tension between the literal and the sex-related meaning that *come* and *huevos* have acquired as a consequence of its lexicalization with a sexual sense lends itself to humorous effects. Indeed, the sexual interpretation of a word belonging to a non sexual semantic domain is a major source of puns and word play.

5. Conclusions and final remarks

The role metaphor plays in taboo-induced lexical variation has led me to consider in the present article three types of X-phemistic substitutes lexicalized in different degrees (novel, conventional and explicit) motivated by three metaphor types (creative, semi-lexicalized and lexicalized). The analysis undertaken here provides evidence for the fact that both semi-lexicalized and creative metaphors can suit the purpose of euphemism and dysphemism by conceptualizing a given reality within a conceptual network. Neither of these X-phemistic metaphor types has been (not yet, at least) lexicalized with the taboo concept they denote. However, lexicalized X-phemistic metaphorical words, those in which the second order or figurative meaning becomes the norm in the speech community, are deprived of their capacity to conceptualize the taboo in particular terms, as they have become too closely associated with the taboo area and thus have become tainted and required replacement. In fact, lexicalized metaphors are felt to have lost their metaphorical status, as happens with many X-phemistic words from the taboo areas of sex (*come* or *cock*) and death (*pass away*), which leads to polysemy motivated by taboo topics.

As we have seen, there is an important difference between lexicalized metaphors in the taboo areas on which this study has focused. Whereas in the field of sex the meaning of some lexicalized words like *come* or *cock* have narrowed to the taboo sense alone and have degenerated into dysphemistic terms, in the taboo area of death the lexicalized metaphorical unit maintains its capacity to refer euphemistically to the taboo, despite its close connection with the forbidden concept, and constitutes a mild and “good-sounding” lexical alternative to the straightforward reference to death.

The considerations stated in relation to the process of lexicalization of metaphorical items has led me to revisit one of the basic tenets of Lakoff and Johnson’s CMT, the principle of unidirectionality. I have demonstrated that when using lexicalized linguistic realizations of a given conceptual metaphor in communication, the mapping of knowledge

from the source domain onto the target domain can be considered as bidirectional. Indeed, some lexicalized metaphors create similarities between the taboo referent and the “innocent” source domain used to conceptualize the taboo topic that previously were not known to exist, which is the source of humour and word play, especially in the field of sex.

In sum, the multiplicity of X-phemistic substitutes for taboo matters is a consequence of the fact that taboo keeps its force intact, not only in the past, but also in current Western societies. As metaphor is one of the most prolific linguistic devices in the reference to taboo topics, CMT opens a way to the analysis of taboo-induced lexical variation, a process in which the degree of lexicalization of metaphorical items with the taboo sense has a decisive effect on the X-phemistic capacity of figurative language.

Notes

1. Allan and Burridge (1991 and 2006) coined the cover term *X-phemism* to account for the set union of euphemism, dysphemism and ortophemism (i.e., straight talking, using neutral terms from an axiological point of view). From this perspective, the different kinds of X-phemisms constitute cross-varietal synonyms for a given taboo concept in which the connotations obviously differ, depending on the context of use and the speaker’s intention.

2. *Referent manipulation* is the process whereby the language user presents the taboo concept in a particular way, either softening its less acceptable aspects or, on the contrary, intensifying them. The referent does not undergo any alteration in itself, though it is manipulated by the speaker or writer, and the result of this manipulation is what the receiver notices. For a full description of this process, see Crespo-Fernández (2007).

3. Following Geeraerts *et al.* (1994: 15), in the present study I will approach the phenomenon of lexical variation with regard to polysemy and conceptual metaphor.

4. Hereafter the words and phrases I want to highlight in the examples will appear in italics.

5. This expression comes from an incident during the 1970s that involved the African Princess Elizabeth de Toro, who was caught having sex at Orly Airport with a Frenchman. When asked later what they had been doing, the woman said they were merely discussing the situation in Uganda. Hence the X-phemism *Ugandan affairs*, which was coined by the British satirical magazine *Private Eye* (OED2).

6. *Uganda* can be found in Holder’s *Dictionary of Euphemisms* with the meaning of ‘a promiscuous sexual relationship’ (2003) and *discuss Uganda* as ‘to have sex’ in Thorne’s *Dictionary of Contemporary Slang* (2007).

7. Though *discussing Uganda* and its variants are given the label of “euphemism” in the dictionaries mentioned in note 6, they are actually cases of what Allan and Burridge (1991) refer to as “euphemistic dysphemisms”, i.e., those words and phrases in which the locution is recognized as a euphemism, though the illocution is dysphemistic. Under this label, lexical units which refer to taboo topics in a humorous way are included, as – we should not forget – “straight” euphemism does not have a humorous objective. In this vein, Burridge (forthcoming) considers humorous euphemistic dysphemisms as “ludic euphemisms”, and gives several curious examples as *the differently pleased* (‘sadoomasochists’) or *person with hard to meet needs* (‘serial killer’).

8. See Keyes (2010: 25–28) for examples of novel X-phemisms that involve Bill Clinton, Barack Obama or the US Senator Larry Craig.

9. From this point of view, X-phemistic references from the field of professional writing serve the same purpose as jargon: to identify and differentiate group members from non-groups members. In this vein Burrige (forthcoming) considers that euphemism is a useful instrument to show solidarity and help to define the gang: “Shared taboos and the rites and rituals that accompany our euphemistic behaviour increase group identity through feelings of distinctiveness; they strengthen the social fabric”.

10. In a previous study I demonstrated that the conceptualization DEATH IS A REST/A SLEEP is pervasive to refer euphemistically to the taboo of death. In a sample of epitaphs from Highgate Cemetery (London), this conceptualization is, together with DEATH IS A JOURNEY, the most relevant from a quantitative point of view (29% of all the metaphorical cases detected) (Crespo Fernández 2011).

11. The notion of death as a sort of orgasm is a common euphemistic device in Cleland’s *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, first published in 1749. Orgasm is euphemized as *agony*, *agony of delight*, *agony of bliss* and *die-away moment*; and the act of reaching orgasm as *die*, *die away* and *expire*.

12. According to Chamizo Domínguez and Sánchez Bendito (2000: 91), the words that have been fully lexicalized with a sexual sense and have lost their literal meaning are *fuck*, *sard*, *swive* ‘copulate’; *pintle*, *pizzle*, *putz*, *scmuck*, *tarse*, *winkle*, *hard-on* ‘penis’; and *cunt*, *fanny*, *minge*, *quaint*, *quim* and *twat* ‘vagina’. According to these scholars, seven out of these sixteen words are no longer present in modern usage.

13. It is interesting to note that the *OED2* reports that the cock metaphor for ‘penis’ does not come directly from the domestic fowl, but from a barrel tap in the shape of a cock’s nest.

14. The use of *pass away* with the meaning of ‘disappear slowly’ is less frequent than the meaning related to death. In fact, as Bultnick (1998: 32) points out, the *Cobuild Dictionary* indicates that *pass away* is used “especially when to want to avoid saying the word *die*”. This euphemistic sense is also of greater relevance in quantitative terms: 38 out of the 50 occurrences of this expression encountered in the *BNC* present a euphemistic value in reference to the taboo of death.

15. “Por los huevos” can be translated as both “because of the eggs” (the meaning intended by the woman) and “from the eggs” (the meaning taken by the old man).

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