



No need to throw a wobbly, we're just doing what comes naturally



ARE WE unwittingly debasing and replacing perfectly adequate and reasonable words with ones that are passive and ineffective? The reluctance to call a spade a spade but instead an entrenching implement has long been with us.

The word "euphemism" comes from early Greek usage, meaning to speak well of, or to use words of good omen. In ancient Greece, there was a fear that giving an object a bad name meant that it would wreak vengeance, and accordingly the Greeks renamed the dangerous Black Sea the Euxine, the sea that is kind to sailors. But is it still fear that motivates us to use euphemisms?

Probably not. As columnist Karl du Fresne points out, "inappropriate" is the euphemism of all recent euphemisms – and one that makes us temperate in describing the most shameful of behaviours. What is evil and illegal these days is often euphemistically described as "inappropriate", and you might wonder if earthquakes will be inappropriate soon.

Misappropriating is a euphemism common in the context of white-collar crime, but what motivates us to use the term in that context while in another we would use burglary, extortion, fraud, and stealing? Defence lawyers of white-collar criminals and erring politicians have begun to use the terms "error" or "mistake" for transgression. An adult video is very often a euphemism for a pornographic item. On the whole, we appear to have stopped generating new euphemisms for taboo topics such as God, sex, excretion, race and death, and it seems that foul behaviour will remain inappropriate for the time being.

In addition to being genteel and positive, euphemisms can be informal, slang, and even somewhat impolite. These are mostly metaphorical forms. Shakespeare was practised in generating this type of euphemism, particularly in place of what polite people might call the sex act but which he described as "making the beast with two backs", or "fishing for trout in muddy waters" (for the sex act with a prostitute). In several ways, Shakespeare made life challenging for teachers of secondary school English classes! Likewise the 20th-century equivalent "letting the ferret out for a run" in New Zealand fiction.

White trash, a term from the United States that appears to have crept in here, is on the other hand a dysphemism. These are the opposite of euphemisms, and are intended to be negative and disparaging even if they did not set out that way. While loo is euphemistic, a shouse or dyke is dysphemistic. The image of the latter is of an insanitary grot, while loo appears neutral.

Dysphemisms have long been a part of the language of political propaganda and the persuasive lobbydom of legislative change. In New Zealand, commies, scabs, Red Feds, bodgies and widgees, Special Constables and, more recently, gangs, have become dysphemistic. Other expressions, such as old man for father, have lost their dysphemism, becoming friendly and genial or at least more positive than negative. (To digress a little, old man flood, old man gorse, or old man southerly have always had connotations of power and size.) Old woman, on the other hand, remains dysphemistic.



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MORE and more we are being furnished with acronyms and, in contrast to euphemisms, these are linguistic items that had no place in ancient Greece. The earliest citation for acronym in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is 1943.

Acronyms do not have the same basis in belief systems or aestheticism, being a pragmatic feature of language. Kiwis have seized heartily the opportunity to acronymise with words ending in -nz, the New Zealand lexicon abounding in four and five-letter acronyms ranging from Binz, Banz, and Bonz to Pinz, Spinz and Winz. Politics provides us with MAF, MoRST, and MOT, while quangos

are full-to-the-brim with acronyms. We have become familiar too with initialisms such as CPI, CRI and TPK, which were not around in great-grandpa's day, and great-grandpa would probably have had trouble with the headline "ABs prepare for Bok-lash".

But all these trends are simply examples of development within a living language, and while some of us might jump up and down, spit tacks, or throw a wobbly, there is not really very much to drive us up the wall about.

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