

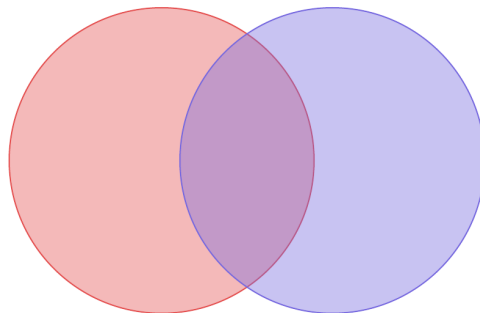
Dark humor and euphemism as facilitators of state excess

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Definitions and examples

Dark humor, sometimes referred to as “sick” or “gallows” humor, is comedic use of subject matter generally considered to be inappropriate for polite discussion. These can include sex, death, and various bodily functions. In addition, dark humor can include what might be described as depictions of extreme incongruity, often of a grotesque nature. Dark humor has a long tradition in literature and the arts. Shakespeare employed comic relief to great effect in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. Jonathan Swift’s *Modest Proposal* (1729) suggested cannibalism as a remedy for poverty and famine in British-occupied Ireland. Heller’s *Catch 22* (1961) and Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969) are two landmark novels with absurd themes set during World War II. Stanley Kubrick’s film *Dr Strangelove: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964) was a farcical depiction of nuclear war.

A euphemism is a vague or relatively bland expression that substitutes for one that is explicitly distasteful or offensive. As is the case with dark humor, euphemisms abound in discussions of sex, death, and bodily functions. “Family planning” is a gentler way of referring to contraception. Reference to a person as “tired and emotional” suggests the subject was intoxicated; to be “with the angels” means to be dead. The flip side of euphemisms are terms that can be derogatory or pejorative, such as “Septic” (a North American), “Bosche” (a German), or “Cracker” (a poor white southern



American).

As the Venn diagram above suggests, euphemism and dark humor are distinct, but in some instances they may co-exist. An example of “pure” dark humor was noted during a visit to Australia in 1966 by US President Lyndon Johnson. Australian opposition to the war in Vietnam had begun to intensify, and Johnson’s limousine was briefly blocked by demonstrators. The New South Wales Premier riding with Johnson is reported to have said, “Run the bastards over.”¹

An example of a simple euphemism is the term “to waste,” meaning to kill. Thus, one might say that “Corporal Smith was wasted by an enemy sniper.”

Then there are those terms that combine dark humour with euphemism. In the 17th and 18th centuries, five successive ships of the Royal Navy were named *HMS Olive Branch*. They were intended to serve as fireships, loaded with combustible materials, ignited, and floated towards the enemy fleet.

The song “Puff the Magic Dragon, recorded in 1962, described how a little boy befriended a dragon with whom he played blissfully. The catchy tune and joyful lyrics celebrated the innocence of

¹ <https://www.nfsa.gov.au/collection/curated/holt-hosts-australias-first-presidential-visit>

childhood and sounded very much like a children's song.² During the Vietnam War, the name was ironically given to a killing machine, the AC-47 "Spooky," a military version of the DC-3. Equipped with high speed machine guns and used to provide close air support to troops on the ground, "Puff" the aircraft was able in six seconds to blanket an area the size of a football field with rounds placed two metres apart.

The functions of euphemism

Euphemisms serve three general purposes related to the superfluous use of state power. These comprise

1. Socialization and disinhibition of state actors;
2. Concealment or minimization of state excesses; and
3. Post-hoc rationalization or extenuation of the activities in question.

Socialization

For most people, engaging in inappropriate behaviour, or simply tolerating it, does not come naturally. This is the case whether the behaviour entails verbal abuse or genocide. Rather, the individual will usually require a degree of training, which can include encouragement, and reassurance that the activity in question is necessary, normal, or at least, acceptable. This can be facilitated by using language which muffles the true harshness of the behaviour and the severity of its impact.

By denigrating or dehumanizing an adversary, pejorative terms may lower the inhibitions against inflicting harm. This is, of course, a staple of war propaganda. Dower's *War Without Mercy* is a chilling discussion how adversaries in the Pacific War depicted each other.³ Practically every culture has terms of insult directed at specific sub groups. Police often speak disparagingly of those with whom they come into contact, whether criminal or victim. Disparagement may be specific to race or ethnicity, or rather generic, and may include pejorative references based on age, disability, gender, gender identity, religion, sexual orientation, nationality, and racial or ethnic attributes. In some cases, pejorative references can be paternalistic rather than malicious. In other settings they may be viciously contemptuous. Thus, the Police Service of Northern Ireland discourages the use of terms such as "Old Coder" "Wee Girl" "Cretin" "Cripple" "Wog" and "Paki" among many others. Given the decades of violent sectarian conflict in the jurisdiction, it is hardly surprising that terms such as "Happy Clappy" "Holy Roller" "Taig" "Prod" and "Orange" are also discouraged.⁴

Euphemisms can also be used to reassure state actors and the citizenry in whose name they serve that their actions are acceptable. The classic exposition of euphemism as a political tool is George Orwell's 1946 essay "Politics and the English Language."

"Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called *transfer of population* or *rectification of frontiers*. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic *lumber camps*: this is called *elimination of unreliable elements*. Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them."⁵

² Suggestions that the song made vague allusion to drug use have been denied by the song's writers.

³ John W Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*. New York: WW Norton, 1986

⁴ Biased language is officially discouraged by the New York Police Department, but allegations of such have elicited a departmental response that is, at best, tepid. See New York City Department of Investigation, Office of the Inspector General for the NYPD (OIG_NYPD) Complaints of Biased Policing in New York City: An assessment of NYPD's investigations, policies, and training (June 2019) <https://www.courthousenews.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/nypd-bias-report.pdf>

⁵ *Horizon* (volume 13, issue 76, pages 252–265); https://www.orwell.ru/library/essays/politics/english/e_polit

Secrecy

State excess can be of such a magnitude, and involve such horrendous practices, that states may wish to conceal their activities to the greatest possible extent. Unspeakable acts may be just that. Because of the nature of their activities, authoritarian dictatorships have made substantial contributions to the muted lexicon of state excess. The Nazi regime engaged in a great deal of activity, the circumstances of which they were understandably disinclined to publicize. But the activity continued, and it had to be called something.⁶ People with various disabilities became the subjects of involuntary euthanasia, referred to as “mercy killings.” The Charitable Foundation for Curative and Institutional Care organized involuntary sterilization for those who were spared “merciful” intervention. The SS “Business Administration Main Office” co-ordinated slave labour for munitions factories. *Sonderbehandlung* (“special treatment”) meant summary execution. *Endlösung* (the Final Solution) was the term for genocide.

French forces used torture liberally in Vietnam and Algeria, but authorities in Paris, as a matter of policy denied this. Military personnel refrained from using the term “torture” to refer to their interrogation practices, referring to them generally as “intelligence collection.” Particular methods of torture were discussed euphemistically: Torture by means of electric shock was referred to as “Gégène” after the portable generators used for the purpose. Water torture was referred to as “la baignoire”the bathtub. The summary executions and disposition of corpses that usually followed torture was referred to as “corvée de bois” (wood chores). At the beginning of the atomic age, the United States customarily referred to nuclear weapons as “special weapons.” In the US, at least, the term nuclear is now used explicitly.⁷

Rationalization

Trivializing harm, or denying it altogether, often relies on verbal obfuscation. Outright dismissal of alleged wartime atrocities as “enemy propaganda” is not uncommon; initial responses to the My Lai Massacre were illustrative. For a time, radiation exposure was measured by the US government in terms of “sunshine units.” Use of the latter term was discontinued when it was determined to be excessively ironic. Necessity may be invoked openly, or by means of illogical gymnastics such as those captured in the saying “We had to destroy the village in order to save it.”⁸ A war injury is trivialized when the experience in question is referred to as having been “banged –up”

The functions of dark humor

Individuals in high-pressure occupations often resort to dark humour as a means of stress reduction. Freud’s 1927 essay *Humour (Der Humor)* observed that black humour served as a defense mechanism against otherwise unpleasant stimuli. This general explanation obtains regardless of whether the activity in question is honourable and appropriate, or harmful and destructive.

There are entirely worthy activities that require a degree of psychological fortification because they can be exceptionally stressful. These can include emergency services generally; or caring for those who are aggressive, distressed, or otherwise psychologically damaged. Some people may mobilize religious faith as a means of coping, while others develop a degree of psychological detachment. Others still embrace darker thoughts and actions. Today’s medical students undergoing clinical

⁶ For a glossary of Nazi euphemisms, see Hilberg 216; 266

⁷ [https://media.defense.gov/2019/Nov/21/2002215048/-1/-1/1/AFNWC%20MEDIA%20KIT%20FY20%20\(NOV%202019\).PDF](https://media.defense.gov/2019/Nov/21/2002215048/-1/-1/1/AFNWC%20MEDIA%20KIT%20FY20%20(NOV%202019).PDF)

⁸ The term itself evolved from a comment attributed to a US Army officer following a battle that took place five weeks prior to the My Lai Massacre: “It became necessary to destroy the town to save it.” Steven L Carter “Destroying a Quote’s History in Order to Save It” Bloomberg Opinion February 10, 2018. <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2018-02-09/destroying-a-quote-s-history-in-order-to-save-it>

training must cope with a relentless torrent of life or death situations, for extended periods of time. The psychological effects of routine exposure to inevitable death or intense suffering, often beyond the student's (or anyone else's) control, can be intense. Melvin Konner, an award winning anthropologist-turned-medical student, described a variety of coping strategies in his book *Becoming a Doctor*.⁹ These included vulgar jokes about patients, and the use of gruesome slang sufficient to make a reader wince. For example, paediatric burns patients were referred to as “crispy critters” or “toasted toddlers,” combining dark humor with euphemism.¹⁰ In the past, rituals of medical training in the United States included cohorts of students sitting for professional portraits, often in the presence of cadavers in humorous poses.¹¹ One sees vivid reflections of the *deformation professionnelle* characteristic of medical trainees in warfare, genocide, and policing.

Police, like doctors, can experience extreme stress in the course of their work. They are often the first responders to catastrophic injuries accidentally incurred or intentionally inflicted. They may be charged with the unenviable task of informing citizens that their loved ones have perished, and of comforting them in their acute distress. Their work may entail a seemingly endless series of miserable people in miserable situations. Witnessing death, and its residue, is part of the job. As if this is not bad enough, a police officer may be deeply resented by those whom she has sworn to serve, and face hostility, unpredictability, and danger on a routine basis. It is not surprising then that black humour is common to policing.

Those police who deal with fatalities on a regular basis have shorthand ways of describing the situation and its aftermath. The acronym DODI, short for “Dead One Did It,” refers to single vehicle accidents in which the driver was the sole occupant. To notify the immediate relatives of a deceased person is to deliver a “Deathogram,”¹² One can purchase a T-shirt of the Chicago police homicide squad bearing the motto, “Our day starts when yours ends.”¹³

Certain police tools of trade have also been the subject of dark humor. In the UK, to “ride the lightning” refers to the experience of being tasered.¹⁴ The term Big Red Key refers to a battering ram used for forced entries to dwellings or other premises. It is also known as The Enforcer.¹⁵

Most readers will be familiar with what are often termed “speed traps.” There are times and locations where police officers, equipped with radar detectors, can be relatively confident of detecting speeding motorists. Similarly, there may be stop signs situated in places where

⁹ Melvin Konner, *Becoming a Doctor: A Journey of Initiation in Medical School*. New York: Penguin Books, 1988. Konner's account validated much of another doctor's earlier fictional account of medical training. Shem's *The House of God* was so insightful that it became immensely popular among American medical students of the 1980s, and made an enduring contribution to the jargon of medical training. See Samuel Shem, *The House of God* (1st ed.1978). Richard Marek Publishers; Markel, Howard “A Book Doctors Can't Close” *New York Times* August 17, 2009. https://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/18/health/18house.html?_r=0

¹⁰ Konner, 111-113.

¹¹ Harriet Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from colonial times to the present*. New York: Anchor Books 2006. See also https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Medical-students-playing-cards-with-cadaver-propped-up-with-a-lit-cigarette-in-its-mouth_fig3_7163703

¹² Tricia Scott (2007) Expression of humour by emergency personnel involved in sudden deathwork, *Mortality*, 12:4, 350-364. DOI: 10.1080/13576270701609766; see also Malcolm Young (1995) Black humour - making light of death, *Policing and Society*, 5:2, 151-167.

¹³ <https://chicagofireandcopshop.com/product/chicago-police-department-homicide-t-shirt/>

¹⁴ Laura Italiano “You wanna ride the lightning?’ Cop threatens students with Taser” *New York Post* April 1, 2017 <https://nypost.com/2017/04/01/you-wanna-ride-the-lightning-cop-threatens-students-with-taser/>

¹⁵ <https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/9685/response/23504/attach/2/2009030007434%2020090408%201229%20ENFORCER%20DATA.pdf>

drivers are likely, wilfully or otherwise, to ignore them. Such sites may be referred to as “cherry patches,” “duck ponds,” or “cash registers.”¹⁶

Pejorative references may also focus on certain recreational subcultures. Australian motorcyclists, generally not renowned for being risk-averse, have been referred to as “temporary Australians.”¹⁷

Reference above to Arctic lumber camps was Orwell’s implicit acknowledgement of Soviet ruthlessness during the Stalinist era. But he would also have been aware of Britain’s use of concentration camps during the Boer war and its aerial bombardment of Iraq in the 1920s.¹⁸

Orwell is, of course, best known for his dystopian classic *Nineteen Eighty-Four: A Novel*¹⁹ a caricature of totalitarian dictatorship, in which the “Ministry of Peace” was responsible for making war, and the “Ministry of Love” for maintaining loyalty to the state and for inflicting torture on those individuals who were not compliant.

Unit 713 of the Japanese Imperial Army, which conducted medical research on prisoners of war and Chinese civilian captives, referred to their subjects as “logs.” Sex slaves serving Japanese military personnel were called “comfort women.” Luftwaffe specialists in aviation medicine spoke of their captive subjects as “guinea pigs” or “adult pigs.”

During Argentina’s “Dirty War” of the late 1970s, the military dictatorship was faced with the logistical challenge of disposing of approximately 20,000 victims of torture and assassination. The two most common means of achieving this were dropping them at sea from aircraft, or incinerating them. The term used to refer to the victims discarded at sea was “*comida de pescado*” (fish food); those set alight were “*asado*” (attending a barbecue).

But euphemism has hardly been the monopoly of dictatorships. Liberal democracies too, have freely employed euphemisms to refer to their more controversial activities. The French, particularly in the course of their unsuccessful attempts to suppress independence movements in the former colonies of Indochina and Algeria, relied on torture extensively. Many, if not most of those tortured were then promptly executed. In Algeria, “*corvée de bois*” (firewood detail), became a euphemism for summary execution. “*la baignoire*” (bathtub) was shorthand for water torture.

Methods used by US forces during the suppression of Philippine independence movement at the beginning of the 20th century included forcing water down a captive’s throat or immersing their head in water to simulate drowning. The colloquial term for such practices was the “water cure.” During the administration of George W. Bush a century later, the practice had evolved into what became known as “water boarding.” In 2006, the President reminded the world that “The United States does not torture.”²⁰

¹⁶ Erin Fuchs, “19 Phrases That Only Police Officers Will Understand *Business Insider Australia*, January 10, 2014. <https://www.businessinsider.com.au/phrases-only-cops-would-understand-2014-1?r=US&IR=T>

¹⁷ Some motorcyclists have actually embraced what others would regard as a dismissive insult. <http://temporaryaustralians.com.au/>; In the United States, The term “redneck” has also been defiantly appropriated by those who might otherwise find it personally offensive.

¹⁸ Elizabeth van Heyningen, *The Concentration Camps of the Anglo-Boer War: A Social History*. Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2013; Great Britain, Air Ministry, “Note on the method of employment of the Air Arm in Iraq.” <https://www.flightglobal.com/FlightPDFArchive/1924/1924-0517.PDF>

¹⁹ London: Secker and Warburg 1949

²⁰ President Bush Delivers Remarks on Terrorism https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/09/06/AR2006090601425.html?itid=lk_inline_manual_20

The Vietnam War inspired a raft of expressions which served to make horrible consequences appear more benign. These included such terms as Neutralization, Pacification, Zippo Raids (the burning of villages), Willie Peter (white phosphorous) Mighty Mite (a commercial air-blower used for injecting gas into tunnels). Friendly fire remains a term that refers to inadvertent attacks on one's own forces or allies. It has, however, has been further softened to "amicicide."²¹

Conclusion

Producers of state excess may experience lasting psychological damage. Memory and conscience may not always be amenable to erasure, but dark humour and euphemism can lessen the propensity to call up disturbing mental images from the past. Of course, this can also assist the architects of state excess to avoid blame. Euphemism can give meaning and define reality, as it has for the 40% of US voters who remain convinced that the 2020 presidential election was "stolen." Those who enshrine metaphors are in a position to proclaim the truth. For this reason, it is important to challenge verbal obscurantism, and to expose things explicitly as they are and have been.

²¹ Charles R Schrader, *Amicide: The Problem of Friendly Fire in Modern War*. Fort Leavenworth, KS, Combat Studies Institute, 1982 <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a211713.pdf>