2.9: Euphemisms

A euphemism is a less direct term, used in the place of a more specific term, which may be considered offensive to the audience. When used in this way, euphemisms tend to "sanitize" or cleanup one's language. The reason for using a euphemism is to soften the impact of a word to make it more audience-acceptable. The problem is that "more acceptable" means that the word used in place of the one that would have been used, is often less precise.

A euphemism can basically be any word that a listener can associate it with the offensive or taboo term which it replaces, or understands the connection between the word and the taboo. There is no shortage of taboos pertaining to the human body, sexuality, bodily functions, death, politics, war, or any other subject. For example:

- *domestic engineer* is used in the place of "housewife"
- *eliminate with prejudice* is used instead of "kill"
- *correctional facility* rather than "prison"
- *administrative assistant* rather than "secretary"

As you may be seeing, euphemisms are a manipulation of the connotation of a word. Euphemisms are sometimes necessary in order to soften a word that an audience may find offensive and unacceptable, thus leading to immediate rejection of an advocate's point of view without fair evaluation of that view. However, they should be used sparingly, and with extreme care, because euphemisms increase the ambiguity level in all areas of communication including argumentation.

In his essay "Politics and the English Language," George Orwell claimed that the

"mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence is the most marked characteristic of modern English expression, and especially of any kind of social, cultural or political writing." People have to think less if they use vague language, he said, and, "this reduced state of consciousness, if not indispensable, is at any rate favorable to
conformity." And he adds, "But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought." ¹

Reference