

Rhetorical Functions Of Euphemisms In Crisis Communication By Political Leaders

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Abstract

This paper explores the strategic use of euphemisms in political leaders' crisis communication through the lens of Aristotelian rhetoric. Euphemisms, often dismissed as mere politeness, serve powerful rhetorical functions in shaping public perception during times of national or international crises such as pandemics, wars, or economic downturns. By employing ethos, pathos, and logos, euphemisms are utilized to reduce public panic, deflect responsibility, and reinforce authority. The study draws from rhetorical and crisis communication theories and offers a comparative analysis of political leaders' speeches during various crises, including COVID-19, military interventions, and economic collapses. The findings suggest that euphemistic language plays a central role in constructing politically favorable narratives, often at the expense of transparency. Understanding these rhetorical choices is essential for promoting critical public engagement and ethical communication in governance.

Introduction

In times of crisis, the words political leaders choose carry enormous weight. Their language must inspire confidence, provide clarity, and prevent widespread panic. However, clarity is not always the priority. Instead, euphemisms—mild or indirect expressions substituted for harsh or unsettling realities—are often employed to soften the impact of difficult truths. Far from being mere linguistic decorations, euphemisms serve vital rhetorical functions, particularly during crises where public trust and perception are at stake.

Drawing upon Aristotelian rhetorical appeals—ethos (credibility), pathos (emotional appeal), and logos (logical reasoning)—this paper analyzes how euphemisms are used in political speeches to manage crises. In this context, euphemisms can reduce public anxiety, shield leaders from blame, and reframe negative realities into manageable or even virtuous challenges. Using a comparative approach, this study examines how leaders across different political systems use euphemistic language during critical events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, military conflicts, and economic meltdowns.

Main Part

1. Euphemism as Rhetorical Strategy: An Aristotelian Perspective

Aristotle's three modes of persuasion—ethos, pathos, and logos—remain foundational in rhetorical theory. Political leaders in crisis often combine these appeals through euphemistic language to achieve specific outcomes.

- Ethos (Credibility): Leaders project trustworthiness by speaking calmly and rationally. Euphemisms like “temporary inconvenience” for lockdowns or “operational pause” for military retreats maintain a composed tone, reinforcing the speaker's control over the situation.
- Pathos (Emotional Appeal): Euphemisms often tap into collective emotions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, terms like “social distancing” (instead of “forced isolation”) invoked communal responsibility rather than fear, framing compliance as a moral duty.
- Logos (Logical Reasoning): Euphemistic language can appear objective or technical. For example, “quantitative easing” during economic crises sounds analytical, disguising what is essentially large-scale money printing.

2. Euphemisms in Health Crises: The COVID-19 Pandemic

The global COVID-19 pandemic offers a rich case study of euphemistic rhetoric. Governments worldwide struggled to balance transparency with the need to avoid public panic. Leaders employed a wide range of euphemisms:

- “Shelter in place” instead of “lockdown” in the U.S., suggesting protection rather than restriction.
- “Circuit breaker” in Singapore, framing restrictions as temporary and technical, much like an electrical reset.
- “Flattening the curve” provided a visual metaphor to suggest manageable progress, downplaying death rates.

These terms were not neutral. They shaped the public's emotional response (pathos), reinforced trust in institutional authority (ethos), and gave the impression of scientific rationality (logos).

3. War and Conflict: Sanitizing Violence Through Euphemism

Military and geopolitical conflicts are frequently narrated using euphemisms to preserve national morale and justify action.

- “Surgical strikes” implies precision and cleanliness, reducing the mental image of bloodshed.
- “Neutralize the threat” avoids the direct mention of killing.
- “Collateral damage” masks the civilian cost of military action.

These euphemisms serve to manage pathos by minimizing the emotional weight of war. At the same time, they enhance ethos, as leaders present themselves as careful, deliberate decision-makers. In speeches during the Iraq War, U.S. President George W. Bush repeatedly used the phrase “weapons of mass destruction,” a term that framed the war as preventive and justified, even though evidence was lacking—a logical appeal (logos) with ethically questionable implications.

4. Economic Crises and Euphemistic Rebranding

In economic downturns, euphemisms help governments maintain public confidence. For instance:

- “Economic adjustment” or “fiscal discipline” for austerity.
- “Workforce optimization” for mass layoffs.
- “Quantitative easing” for inflationary monetary policies.

These phrases obscure the real impact on citizens' lives, instead presenting crises as necessary recalibrations. This use of logos appears analytical and rational, while sidestepping emotional distress. During the 2008 financial crisis, many leaders used terms like “market correction” to avoid admitting systemic failure. These euphemisms reinforced ethos, suggesting the crisis was under expert control.

5. Comparative Rhetorical Practices

While the core rhetorical functions remain consistent, cultural and political contexts influence euphemistic usage. For example:

- Authoritarian regimes (e.g., China) often employ strict control over crisis terminology, such as calling the early COVID-19 outbreak a “public health incident” to delay panic and scrutiny.
- Democratic leaders tend to mix euphemisms with reassurance. For instance, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern used phrases like “stay in your bubble,” combining metaphorical language with community-focused messaging.

The rhetorical function of euphemisms, therefore, adapts to local political expectations, but their core function—to manage perception during crisis—remains universal.

Conclusion

Euphemisms are indispensable tools in the rhetorical toolkit of political leaders during times of crisis. Whether through war, pandemic, or economic collapse, such language is employed to protect public morale, maintain authority, and frame harsh realities in digestible terms. By embedding euphemisms within the Aristotelian framework of ethos, pathos, and logos,

politicians craft narratives that often prioritize persuasion over transparency. This article has shown that euphemistic language serves as a mechanism of both comfort and control. It can reduce panic, foster unity, and present complex problems as solvable. However, it can also obscure truth, delay critical responses, and erode democratic accountability. A critical awareness of euphemistic rhetoric—especially in crisis communication—is essential for citizens and analysts alike. Only by understanding the persuasive architecture behind such language can we engage more deeply and responsibly with political discourse.

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