

Metaphor in the euphemistic manipulation of the taboo of sex

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The present paper examines how metaphor works in euphemistic manipulation with reference to the taboo of sex. This manipulation consists of a semantic translation by which a taboo term is replaced by a lexical unit free from the negative connotations of the linguistic taboo. In this process of conceptual makeup, the metaphor stands out as a powerful linguistic device which generates heterogeneous metaphorical euphemistic alternatives which differ on the degree of vinculation and ambiguity with the taboo concept and the mitigating capacity.

In studying the role of figurative language in euphemism, it is also worthwhile to draw attention to euphemistic metaphors within the framework of the well known cognitive theory of metaphor initiated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). In fact, the cognitive value of metaphor and its capacity to structure conceptual domains plays a crucial role in the interpretation and mitigating effectiveness of metaphorical euphemisms in social interaction.

El presente artículo examina el funcionamiento de la metáfora en la manipulación eufemística del tabú sexual. Esta manipulación consiste en una traslación semántica por la cual el término interdicto es sustituido por otro libre de las connotaciones negativas del tabú lingüístico. En este proceso de maquillaje conceptual, la metáfora se erige como un importante recurso generativo de metáforas eufemísticas con diferente grado de ambigüedad respecto al tabú y con distinta capacidad de atenuación.

Asimismo, y adoptando el clásico enfoque cognitivo iniciado por Lakoff y Johnson (1980), demostramos que la capacidad de la metáfora para crear redes conceptuales y, con ello, estructurar nuestro sistema conceptual no es ajena al eufemismo. De hecho, el valor conceptual de la metáfora y su capacidad para estructurar esferas conceptuales

tiene gran relevancia en la interpretación y efectividad mitigadora de la metáfora eufemística.

Key words: euphemism, sexual interdiction, referent manipulation, metaphorical euphemism, cognitive semantics, conceptual metaphor.

Palabras clave: eufemismo, interdicción sexual, manipulación del referente, eufemismo metafórico, semántica cognitiva, metáfora conceptual.

1. REFERENT MANIPULATION AND METAPHORICAL LANGUAGE

Language users resort to euphemisms to mitigate the potential dangers of certain taboo words or expressions, considered too blunt or offensive for a given social situation. Euphemism is thus viewed as an acceptable way to introduce taboos in social interaction by means of a semantic process thanks to which the taboo referent is stripped of its most explicit, offensive or obscene overtones. In this mechanism of conceptual makeup, human beings usually tend to employ metaphors to soften the effect of what they really wish to communicate. In fact, metaphorization, which is thought to include other types of resources of figurative language¹, stands out as the most prolific linguistic device of lexical creativity, pervasive in everyday speech as well as in literary discourse. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 3) pointed out, we live on metaphors:

[...] metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language, but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.

Therefore, metaphorical language no doubt constitutes a potent source for euphemistic (as well as dysphemistic) reference, as it has been emphasized in much of the research concerning the phenomenon². Thus, metaphor plays a crucial role in the manipulation of the taboo referent³

in the sense that it is at the user’s disposal to model the distasteful concept and present it without its most pejorative implications or, by contrast, to intensify those unacceptable conceptual traits. This can be illustrated in the metaphorical disguise that a taboo such as ‘brothel’ may adopt in the 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 *academy* or to a dysphemistic metaphor such as *bird cage*. In this way, figurative language provides the speaker either with a linguistic safeguard or with a verbal weapon for presenting the banned concept in social interaction. In short, metaphor constitutes a major device in the conceptual makeup of euphemism and dysphemism within the more general process of referent manipulation, as shown in the following figure with reference to the above mentioned taboo ‘brothel’:

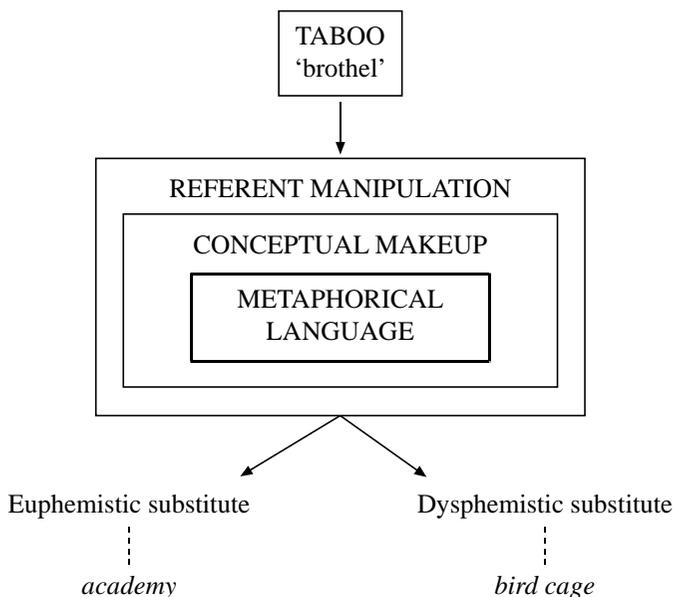


Figure 1: Metaphor and referent manipulation

2. SEMANTIC CONSIDERATIONS OF METAPHORICAL EUPHEMISM

In its origin, euphemism is an extra-linguistic process. After all, it is closely tied to the social and psychological factors which give rise to the phenomenon and motivate its presence in social interaction. Nonetheless, euphemism is also analysable from a purely linguistic perspective. Thus the euphemistic substitute and the linguistic taboo it stands for can be labelled as parasynonyms, that is to say, stylistic partial synonyms. This means that the euphemistic choice constitutes a stylistic option motivated by the contextual and pragmatic variables which take place in a given communicative context. In fact, the option for the metaphorical euphemism *personal secretary* 'prostitute' instead of its dysphemistic alternative (*whore*) is ultimately linked to a set of situational factors (degree of formality, politeness, speaker's intention, etc.) which have imposed, to a certain extent, the lexical mitigation in a given context.

In euphemistic 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. Neutralization is thus a key concept in the analysis of the euphemistic process, since, as Montero (1981: 41-42) suggests, 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. Therefore, Chamizo and Sánchez (2000: 37-38) believe that, from a strictly linguistic viewpoint, euphemism is a term used with a figurative sense, in other words, with a meaning that, at first glance, does not correspond to it. This can be illustrated in the following example:

(1) She owned a house where the girls were so well taken care of

The term *girls* ('prostitutes'), a word with semantic and affective implications very different from those which the taboo term (*prostitutes*) might present, stands for an inappropriate reality

Metaphor plays a relevant role in euphemistic substitution not only because, as mentioned before, it constitutes a fruitful mechanism of lexical creativity, but also because ambiguity, one of its main

characteristics, is a defining feature of euphemism as a linguistic phenomenon. Following Chamizo and Sánchez (2000: 40-41), a term acts as a euphemism because, in a given context, it is capable of generating an ambiguity which suggests that there may be a distasteful concept underneath. In example (1), the terms *girls* and *house* stand for *prostitutes* and *brothel* respectively, though the possibility that these words might present a literal meaning should not be ruled out. In fact, in euphemistic manipulation literal and figurative meanings coexist, which contributes to the mitigating function of euphemism. As Postigo and Sánchez (1998: 349) point out: “What characterises euphemism is the fact that it keeps its literal meaning, which is a screen to hide reality”. Therefore, the semantic uncertainty of metaphor moves to euphemism and stands out as one of its main features as a linguistic phenomenon.⁵ In this sense, and taking into consideration that euphemisms are always more ambiguous than the taboos they substitute, Del Teso (1998: 199) considers this semantic uncertainty as the raw material of euphemism.

However, euphemistic metaphor, as a consequence of frequent use in reference to the taboo, tends to acquire the meaning that it was supposed to veil, picking up the taboo’s offensive connotations. Because of this, the euphemistic substitute becomes no longer suitable for the mitigation of the taboo, since, by intimate association with the forbidden concept that it referred to, it has become explicit in its reference to the taboo, leading, on many occasions, to a dysphemism. As Burrige (2004: 212) indicates: “Today’s euphemism is tomorrow’s dirt”. This is the last stage of the process of lexicalization of euphemism, after which the euphemistic word or expression is deprived of its capacity to mitigate the taboo, and thus loses its status as euphemism, requiring another euphemistic locution which could actually tone down the concept. This process leads to a countless number of euphemistic substitutes for concepts deemed unfit for normal linguistic usage.⁶ In this respect, the sexual domain is particularly fruitful in lexical creativity. A good case in point is the taboo ‘prostitute’, which has generated more than 2000 lexical substitutes (cf. Allan and Burrige, 1991: 96).⁷

Chamizo and Sánchez (2000: 68-70) distinguish three types of euphemism according to their degree of lexicalization, that is, according to the extent to which the the tabooed conceptual traits have become associated with the euphemistic substitute: “lexicalized euphemisms”

(those in which the figurative meaning is regarded as usual); “semilexicalized euphemisms” (the substitute is associated with the taboo because of its inclusion in a conceptual domain traditionally tied to the forbidden concept); and “creative euphemisms” (the euphemistic alternative is the result of a novel association with the taboo, only accessible in its phraseological context). 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, semilexicalized and poetic or creative metaphors. This distinction is useful in the consideration of euphemistic metaphor as a device which determines the mitigating capacity of lexical units, as indicated in the following section.

3. TOWARDS A TYPOLOGY OF METAPHORICAL EUPHEMISM

Euphemistic manipulation is based on a metaphorical concealment in which the mitigating capacity depends primarily on the contrast between the euphemistic sign and its taboo referent, a contrast which facilitates the ambiguity and uncertainty of the figurative word or expression in its reference to the taboo. As Warren (1992: 136) claims, in the case of semantic innovation, the contrast between the basic and the novel sense keeps euphemistic force alive. Thus, a metaphorical expression such as *enter the dark fields of immortality*⁸ maintains its capacity to mitigate the taboo it stands for (‘reach an orgasm’) because of the following reasons:

- There is a marked contrast between the figurative and the basic meaning. Thanks to this contrast, given the novelty of the association which is established between religion and sex, the taboo has not contaminated the alternative expression.
- The metaphorical choice is obviously ambiguous with respect to its novel meaning. This ambiguity helps to conceal the sexual connotations and allows the mitigation of the sexual referent.
- As Del Teso (1998: 195-197) suggests, the expression is employed in an indefinite way⁹; in other words, it enables the user to designate a taboo concept which is unusual for this linguistic sign.

The metaphorical substitutes which stand for taboo topics do not always follow the above mentioned characteristics. It should be borne in mind that the mitigating capacity of figurative language is a matter of degree which basically depends on the links between the taboo and the metaphorical alternative. In this regard, the mitigation carried out by figurative language leads to heterogeneous lexical substitutes,¹⁰ as shown in the figure that follows:

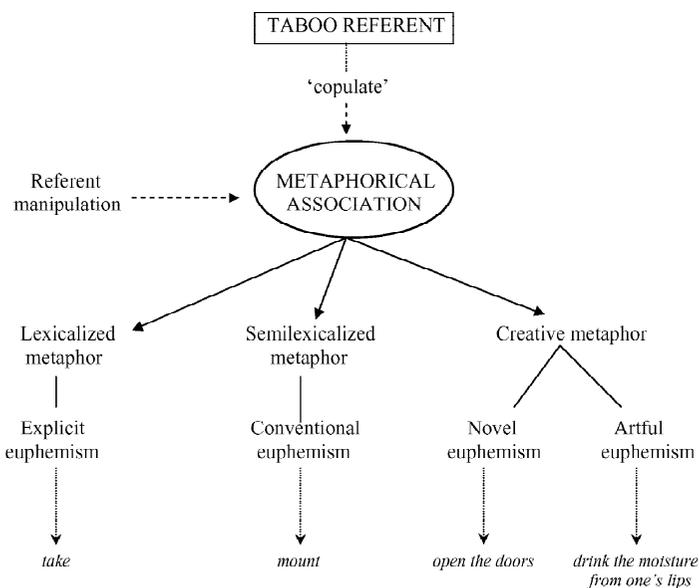


Figure 2: The effect of metaphor on the taboo referent

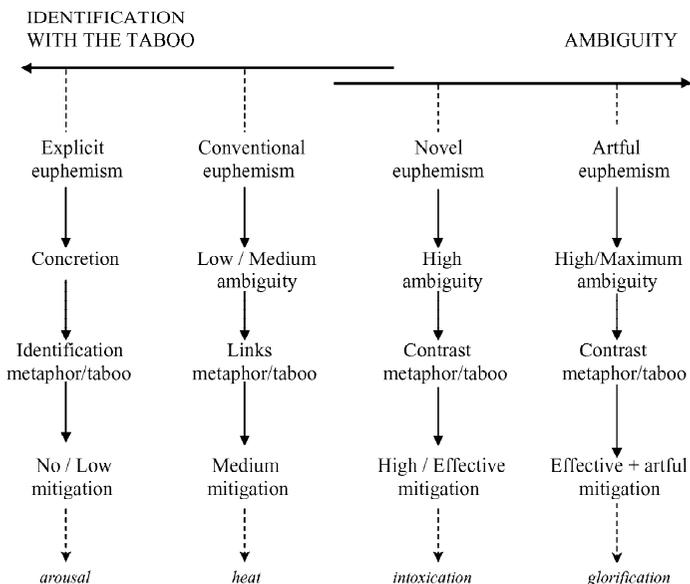
It is interesting to note that the taboo ‘copulate’, after undergoing a metaphorical association, gives rise to different euphemistic substitutes which differ in their degree of lexicalization, in their vinculation with the taboo and, therefore, in their mitigating capacity. The effect of metaphorical language on a taboo such as ‘copulate’ is the source of four types of euphemistic substitutes, as explained below:

- The explicit euphemism take has undergone a process of lexicalization of the tabooed connotations, reason for which it undoubtedly refers to the referent it stands for. Hence, rather than

a real mitigation of the taboo, it constitutes an alternative to a coarse word such as fuck.

- The conventional euphemism¹¹ presents certain semantic associations which make its reference to the taboo possible. Such is the case of mount, a metaphorical term which can be included in the conceptual metaphor ‘to copulate is to ride’ (cf. Chamizo y Sánchez, 2000: 111-114).
- The metaphor open the doors activates a novel meaning with respect to the sense generally accepted for the expression. This meaning is only accessible in its phraseological context, where it acquires its euphemistic power.
- An artful euphemism like drink the moisture from one’s lips stands as a modality of verbal mitigation with a connotative and artistic value on which its euphemistic force is based.¹²

These four types of metaphorical euphemisms constitute four positions of verbal mitigation whose differences primarily depend on their associative links between the word-form and the taboo referent it stands for, as can be noticed in the following figure concerning the taboo of sexual excitation:



4. THE COGNITIVE VALUE OF EUPHEMISTIC METAPHORS

Under the theory of cognitive models (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1987), metaphor has been considered 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. What is more, as Lakoff claims (1987: 337), even our behaviour is significantly affected by conceptual categories. Though in the case of lexicalized metaphors, as indicated before, the metaphorical value tends to be lost, cognitive categorization affects semilexicalized and creative metaphors, since they are the result of a novel conceptualization of the taboo which leads to new metaphorical substitutes (Chamizo, 1998: 52-53). In turn, this new semantic categorization modifies, to a certain extent, our perception of the taboo. Thus, metaphors have the power to create an alternative reality by making us aware of new conceptual systems. That this is so can be gathered from the initiators of the cognitive approach to metaphor, Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 145):

New metaphors have the power to create a new reality. This can begin to happen when we start to comprehend our experience in terms of a metaphor, and it becomes a deeper reality when we begin to act in terms of it.

4.1 Conceptual metaphor and euphemistic interpretation

The cognitive point of view affects metaphorical euphemistic manipulation in a significant way. Figurative language structures the perception of the taboo areas and determines how the mitigation of the taboo referent is actually perceived. In this regard, taboos can be studied according to the metaphors that they generate and the conceptual networks in which these are included, in such a way that the type of metaphor employed in euphemism will have a decisive influence on the perception of each taboo domain. After all, the figurative interpretation of a euphemistic term is motivated by a particular conceptual domain which helps people conceptualize a taboo topic in a certain way.

It seems to be a consensus (Lakoff, 1987; Allan and Burridge, 1991; Pfaff *et al.* 1997; Chamizo and Sánchez, 2000; Sánchez, 2000-2001) that sexual taboos can be analysed in terms of conceptual metaphors.

Let's take the significant example of the conceptual category 'sex as war and violence'. This sphere, the result of a tradition which dates back to Elizabethan literature¹³, constitutes the source of a considerable number of metaphorical terms and expressions related to sex (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 49; Chamizo and Sánchez, 2000: 105-111). This is the reason why so many sexual metaphors are based on violence. Indeed, coition is perceived, in many cases, as a violent act, as a way to overcome an opponent, to beat an enemy. Consequently, many of the metaphorical substitutes included in the conceptual metaphor 'to copulate is to make war' are not only euphemistic, but also dysphemistic, such as *give a stab* 'copulate', *shoot* 'ejaculate', *beat the meat* 'masturbate' or *chopper* 'penis', among others.¹⁴

Therefore, to include a metaphorical substitute in a conceptual mapping related to a certain taboo (as in the case of 'sex is violence', commented above), has an obvious effect on the reception and interpretation of the euphemistic locution. This is so because the conceptualization of sex as violence makes the figurative meaning easier to comprehend and, in this way, it automatically activates the euphemistic reference of the metaphor in a communicative context. After all, the associative links between the metaphorical substitute and the taboo referent require an active participation on the part of the receiver¹⁵, who is expected to identify an alternative and a novel meaning in the designation of the taboo concept. For example, in a statement such as

(2) He invaded the forbidden territory

The verb *invade* will activate its euphemistic sense ('copulate') more effectively if the receiver of the message associates it with the conceptual metaphor 'to copulate is to make war', and links it to other metaphorical terms in this semantic category like *fight*, *kill*, *injure* or *wound*.

Likewise, the sexual euphemistic sense of a metaphor will be favoured by the presence of a phraseological context with lexical units related to this conceptual domain, such as *forbidden territory* in example (2). In this sense, Pfaff *et al.* (1997: 68) have proved in one of their experiments that a contextually consistent conceptualization is a key factor in the recognition of euphemistic meaning. As these authors point out:

[...] people find X-phemisms [*sc.* euphemisms and dysphemisms] easier to comprehend when the X-phemism and the context are conceptually consistent. Participants were able to read an X-phemistic final phrase more quickly if there was a metaphorical match between the context and the ending. This provides evidence that X-phemisms are easier to understand in a metaphorical consistent context [...].

4.2 Conceptual metaphor and euphemistic force

The mitigating power of a euphemistic metaphor is influenced by the conceptual category in which it is included. In fact, people's metaphorical conceptualization of words and expressions related to the taboo of sex determines the euphemistic effectiveness of the figurative language. This can be clearly seen in the analysis of two lexical choices for one referent: *sweet death* and *peak of pleasure*, which designate the same taboo concept ('orgasm') by means of different conceptual metaphors. *Sweet death* is included in the conceptual domain 'orgasm is death', whereas *peak of pleasure* belongs to the cognitive sphere 'orgasm is pleasure'.¹⁶ In this second case, the metaphorical association responds to a conceptualization which is much more conventionally accepted than in the first. This would have a twofold and antithetical effect on metaphorical euphemism: on the one hand, a more immediate euphemistic sense would be favoured with little interpretative effort on the part of the receiver; on the other hand, the conceptual metaphor which associates an orgasm with pleasure would generate an explicit metaphorical euphemism virtually identified with its taboo and, thus, with a low mitigating capacity.¹⁷ What emerges from this is that certain euphemistic metaphors, in trying to avoid linguistic taboos, trigger off the forbidden referents they are meant to conceal.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper, it has been demonstrated that metaphor is a device which plays a crucial role in the euphemistic manipulation of the taboo of sex. This manipulation constitutes a conceptual makeup which allows the speaker to present sexual taboos in social interaction by means of figurative language. Taking into account the fact that metaphor constitutes

the most prolific device in the mitigation of taboo topics, a typology of metaphorical euphemisms has been proposed in the first part of the article, showing how the different nature of metaphors used in the euphemistic process determines the mitigating power and effectiveness of euphemism. The second part has been devoted to euphemistic manipulation within the conceptual metaphor theory. In this respect, it has been noted that conceptual mappings greatly influence the euphemistic interpretation of the figurative meaning and the mitigating force of the metaphor involved in the euphemistic choice.

In short, the present article draws attention to the fact that metaphor is far from being just one of the many semantic devices employed in toning down a taboo topic. More precisely, metaphorization is a central issue in the language of sexual organs and sexual play. In fact, figurative language stands out as a very common resource which languages users resort to in euphemistic manipulation, and its use in the substitution of the taboo of sex in everyday speech as well as in literary language is out of doubt. For these reasons, the phenomenon dealt with in this paper deserves more attention than it has traditionally received, since, despite the considerable amount of research carried out on figurative language, not much ink has been spilled over metaphorization as a purely euphemistic device.

NOTES

* Parts of this paper were delivered at the II International Workshop *Metaphor and Discourse. Where Cognition and Communication Meet*, held at the University Jaume I (Castelló de la Plana), February 2-3, 2006.

¹ As Chamizo (2005: 17) suggests, considering the duality between literal and figurative meaning which characterizes metaphorical processes, certain semantic devices such as metonymy, synecdoque, irony, or litotes can be thought to be metaphorical in nature. To these, Casas (1986: 218) adds circumlocution, hyperbole and antonomasia. What is more, even euphemism and dysphemism could be labelled as types of metaphors (Bolinger, 1980: 49).

- ² A good case in point is the study carried out by Warren (1992). This author classifies 500 euphemistic substitutes according to the mechanisms of semantic innovation which give rise to the lexical mitigation. The results highlight the leading role of figurative language: 208 particularizations and 146 metaphors stand out as the most important semantic devices from a quantitative point of view.
- ³ I understand by *referent manipulation* the process by which the language user presents the taboo concept in a particular way, either softening its less acceptable aspects or, on the contrary, intensifying them. Needless to say, 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.
- ⁴ Chamizo (1998: 29) examines the links between metaphor and ambiguity: “[P]or medio de la metáfora, aunque haya que partir de una ambigüedad significativa con respecto al sentido literal de un término, es como se pueden crear nuevos significados para ese término, que, a su vez, son susceptibles de crear toda una red conceptual más compleja”.
- ⁵ Together with ambiguity, Chamizo and Sánchez (2000: 39-45) consider other characteristics of metaphorical language: first, its capacity to mention what it is unmentionable; second, its impossibility to be substituted by an indirect word or by a translation.
- ⁶ Bolinger (1980: 74) denominates this process “the domino theory of euphemism”: “The downgrading is so regular that it invites a domino theory of euphemism: the fall of each term leads to the fall of the next, and in some areas of meaning we find an endless series of terms each of which had its day of innocence and then fell from grace”. For more about these ever-changing chains of euphemisms, see BurrIDGE (2004: 212-214).
- ⁷ As Allan and BurrIDGE (1991: 96) indicate, “the degree of synonymy in the vocabulary for genitalia and copulation has no parallel elsewhere in the English lexicon.” In fact, these authors point out that there are approximately 1,200 terms for ‘vagina’, 1,000 for ‘penis’ and 800 for ‘copulation’.

- ⁸ Taken from the novel *The Rainbow* by D. H. Lawrence (1990: 451).
- ⁹ “[L]a impropiedad en el uso de los signos lingüísticos consiste en el sutil deslizamiento de la referencia habitual del signo hacia la designación nuevas realidades semejantes o contiguas a las primeras. [...] la impropiedad no es en sí misma un cambio semántico, sino su antesala y condición” (Del Teso, 1998: 197).
- ¹⁰ Although my typology is based, in general terms, on the one proposed by Chamizo and Sánchez (2000), there are certain differences worth mentioning. First, the categories “lexicalized” and “semilexicalized” proposed by these authors correspond with “explicit” and “conventional” respectively in my model. Second, the category “creative” has been divided into two subcategories, namely “novel” and “artful”, according to the artistic and connotative value of the euphemistic choice.
- ¹¹ Lakoff and Johnson (1980) consider the terms *lexicalized* and *conventional* as synonyms. However, I argue that the conventional euphemism derives from a semilexicalized metaphor, since its metaphorical reference to the taboo is conventionally accepted by the vast majority of language users in a given community.
- ¹² For a full description of artful euphemism as a euphemistic modality in literary language, see Allan and Burridge (1991: 210-220) and Crespo (2005-2006, forthcoming).
- ¹³ As examples of sexual metaphors based on war and violence in Shakespeare’s drama, it is worth mentioning substitutes for ‘penis’ such as *dart of love*, *lance*, *pistol*, *sword* and *weapon* (Partridge, 1968: 23).
- ¹⁴ Sánchez (2004: 186-192) shows that the sex-as-war conceptual metaphor is, by far, the most common in sexual vocabulary. In fact, 28% of the words documented by this author for the concept of ‘coition’, 27% for ‘masturbation’ and 22% for ‘penis’ can be included in this cognitive network.
- ¹⁵ Alonso (1978: 197-212) considers that the metaphor of euphemism is a metaphor “in absentia”, that is to say, one in which the taboo concept must be inferred in the process of interpretation.

¹⁶ In the conceptual metaphor “orgasm is death”, Sánchez (2004: 151-152) includes *coital death*, *death in the saddle*, *decease*, *die-away moment*, *tender agony*, etc. In the conceptualization “orgasm is pleasure”, this author mentions *climax*, *culmination of pleasure*, *ecstasy*, *height of joy*, *pleasure frenzy* and *the utmost joy*, among others.

¹⁷ Concerning the degree of mitigation of metaphorical euphemisms, see figure 3.

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