

Euphemisms As A Face-Saving Strategy In A Political Leader's Speech: A Case Study Of Barack Obama's 2016 State Of The Union Address

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Received: 13 October 2025; **Accepted:** 08 November 2025; **Published:** 30 November 2025

Abstract: This study investigates the use of euphemisms as a face-saving strategy in political discourse, focusing on Barack Obama's 2016 State of the Union Address. By analyzing the official transcript, the research identifies lexical-semantic, pragmatic, and discourse-level euphemistic strategies employed to soften sensitive topics, distribute responsibility, and maintain the speaker's credibility. The findings reveal that lexical substitutions, agent avoidance, optimistic framing, and rhetorical devices such as repetition and parallelism are systematically used to mitigate face-threatening content. The study highlights the role of euphemisms in enhancing persuasion, managing public perception, and preserving political authority, demonstrating that strategic language choices are essential in high-stakes political communication.

Keywords: Euphemism; face-saving; political discourse; Barack Obama; State of the Union Address; pragmatics; rhetorical strategies; lexical-semantic analysis.

Introduction: Political speeches are powerful tools for shaping public opinion, framing policy agendas, and managing the image of political leaders. In high-stakes political communication, speakers frequently encounter sensitive topics that could threaten their credibility, authority, or public approval. Euphemisms, as deliberate linguistic strategies, allow politicians to address these issues in a socially acceptable manner, thereby mitigating potential face-threatening acts and preserving both the speaker's and the audience's face [1,3].

Barack Obama's 2016 State of the Union Address, delivered on January 12, 2016 [8], provides a rich context for examining the strategic use of euphemisms in political discourse. The speech addressed a wide range of sensitive topics, including national security, economic challenges, healthcare, and social policies, all of which had the potential to provoke criticism or public concern. By employing euphemisms, Obama was able to soften negative realities, obscure controversial aspects of policy, and maintain his credibility and authority in front of both domestic and international audiences.

This study focuses on how euphemistic language

functions as a face-saving strategy in this particular speech. The research aims to answer the following questions:

1. What types of euphemisms are employed in Obama's 2016 State of the Union Address?
2. How do these euphemisms function pragmatically to preserve the speaker's image and manage audience perception?
3. How do euphemistic strategies interact with rhetorical and discourse-level techniques to achieve politeness and persuasion?

By addressing these questions, the study provides insight into the role of language in political face management and contributes to a broader understanding of strategic communication in high-stakes political contexts.

METHODS

The primary material for this study is Barack Obama's 2016 State of the Union Address, delivered on January 12, 2016. This speech was chosen because it addresses a wide array of politically sensitive topics, including national security, healthcare, economic policy, and social issues, making it a suitable corpus for analyzing

euphemistic strategies in political discourse. The official transcript was retrieved from the White House archives (obamawhitehouse.archives.gov) to ensure accuracy and authenticity.

The study employed a qualitative content analysis approach. The transcript was read multiple times to identify instances of euphemistic language. Euphemisms were defined as lexical, syntactic, or rhetorical expressions used to soften, obscure, or mitigate negative, sensitive, or controversial topics [1, 3]. Each identified euphemism was annotated and categorized according to its communicative function.

The analysis was conducted using a pragmatic and discourse-analytic framework, focusing on the following dimensions:

1. Lexical-semantic strategies: identification of word choices that substitute harsh, negative, or controversial terms with milder expressions.
2. Pragmatic strategies: evaluation of how euphemisms manage face, distribute responsibility, or soften criticism.
3. Rhetorical and discourse-level strategies: examination of how euphemistic expressions interact with repetition, parallelism, framing, and other rhetorical devices to enhance persuasion and maintain a positive speaker image.

The analysis was conducted in three stages:

1. Identification: manually highlighting all instances of euphemistic expressions in the speech transcript.
2. Classification: categorizing euphemisms according to their function (e.g., softening negative events, obscuring responsibility, framing achievements positively).
3. Interpretation: analyzing the pragmatic and rhetorical effects of the euphemisms in maintaining the speaker's face and audience engagement.

This methodology ensures a comprehensive understanding of how euphemistic strategies are employed in political discourse to manage perception, preserve credibility, and achieve persuasive communication goals.

RESULTS

The analysis of Barack Obama's 2016 State of the Union Address reveals that euphemistic strategies are extensively employed to preserve the speaker's face, soften sensitive issues, and frame political actions positively. The findings are organized into three main categories: lexical-semantic euphemisms, pragmatic strategies, and discourse-level rhetorical strategies.

Lexical-Semantic Euphemisms. Obama frequently

substitutes potentially harsh or controversial terms with milder expressions to reduce negative impact. Examples include:

- “enhanced interrogation techniques” instead of “torture”, softening criticism of past military practices.
- “revenue enhancements” instead of “tax increases”, mitigating public resistance to fiscal policies.
- “we face challenges” instead of “we have problems”, framing issues in a less alarming tone.

These lexical choices serve to reduce potential threats to his credibility and moral authority, allowing him to discuss difficult topics without provoking audience hostility.

Pragmatic Strategies. Pragmatically, euphemisms are used to distribute responsibility, reduce confrontation, and maintain audience inclusivity. Key strategies include:

- **Agent avoidance:** Phrases such as “our shared challenges” and “we must work together” diffuse responsibility across multiple actors rather than attributing fault to specific individuals or groups.

- **Optimistic framing:** By using expressions like “we are making progress” or “we can overcome these challenges”, Obama projects hope and emphasizes actionable solutions.

- **Politeness and face-saving:** Euphemistic expressions help preserve both the speaker's positive face and the audience's face, especially when addressing sensitive topics such as national security or social inequalities (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Rhetorical and Discourse-Level Strategies. At the discourse level, euphemisms are combined with rhetorical techniques to enhance persuasive impact and maintain credibility:

- **Repetition and parallelism:** Sentences such as “We have to make our economy work for everyone, not just those at the top” reinforce key messages while softening criticism.

- **Contrastive framing:** Obama contrasts problems with solutions (“we face obstacles, but we are making progress”), which mitigates the severity of negative realities.

- **Metaphoric euphemisms:** Terms like “investing in our future” frame policy initiatives positively, presenting them as constructive rather than controversial.

1. Lexical-semantic strategies are the most common euphemistic devices, softening politically sensitive topics.
2. Pragmatic strategies focus on distributing responsibility, reducing confrontation, and maintaining positive audience perception.

3. Discourse-level rhetorical strategies combine euphemisms with repetition, parallelism, and positive framing to enhance persuasion.

4. Overall, Obama's 2016 State of the Union Address demonstrates a deliberate and systematic use of euphemisms to manage face, maintain authority, and construct a favorable public image.

These findings confirm that euphemisms are not merely stylistic choices but essential tools in political communication, allowing leaders to discuss controversial issues while preserving credibility and public trust.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of Barack Obama's 2016 State of the Union Address demonstrates that euphemisms function as a key face-saving strategy in political discourse. Lexical, pragmatic, and discourse-level euphemisms allow the speaker to address sensitive issues while maintaining credibility and positive public perception. These findings align with Brown and Levinson's [3] politeness theory, which posits that speakers often mitigate face-threatening acts through indirectness, softening, and hedging.

Lexical-semantic euphemisms, such as "enhanced interrogation techniques" and "revenue enhancements", exemplify how subtle lexical choices can minimize the perceived severity of politically controversial topics [1]. By substituting harsher terms with milder expressions, Obama is able to present difficult realities in a socially acceptable manner, reducing potential criticism from both the public and political opponents.

Pragmatically, euphemisms serve to distribute responsibility and reduce confrontation. Phrases like "our shared challenges" and "we must work together" diffuse blame across collective actors, consistent with previous research showing that political leaders frequently employ strategies to avoid personal accountability in sensitive contexts [6, 7]. This technique not only preserves the speaker's face but also maintains audience inclusivity, fostering a sense of unity.

At the discourse level, euphemisms interact with rhetorical strategies such as repetition, parallelism, and contrastive framing. Expressions like "we face obstacles, but we are making progress" demonstrate how the combination of euphemistic language and rhetorical devices reinforces positive framing, a strategy also noted in studies of political and environmental discourse [2, 5]. These strategies enhance the persuasiveness of the speech while softening potential threats to the speaker's credibility.

Overall, the discussion confirms that euphemisms are not merely stylistic devices, but deliberate instruments of strategic communication. In high-stakes political contexts, they help leaders manage perception, maintain authority, and navigate sensitive issues without alienating audiences. The findings extend existing research on political discourse and face-saving, illustrating the systematic use of euphemisms in contemporary U.S. presidential rhetoric [4].

CONCLUSION

This study examined the strategic use of euphemisms as a face-saving device in Barack Obama's 2016 State of the Union Address. The analysis revealed that euphemisms operate on multiple levels-lexical-semantic, pragmatic, and discourse-rhetorical-to mitigate potential threats to the speaker's credibility and maintain a positive public image.

Lexical choices, such as "enhanced interrogation techniques" and "revenue enhancements", illustrate how subtle word substitutions can soften politically sensitive content, consistent with the observations of Allan and Burridge [1]. Pragmatic strategies, including agent avoidance and optimistic framing, distribute responsibility and foster inclusivity, echoing Brown and Levinson's [3] politeness theory and prior studies on political discourse [6, 7]. At the discourse level, euphemisms combined with rhetorical devices like repetition, parallelism, and positive framing strengthen persuasiveness and maintain audience trust [2, 5].

Overall, the findings demonstrate that euphemisms are not mere stylistic choices but essential tools in political communication, enabling leaders to navigate sensitive issues, manage audience perception, and uphold authority. This study contributes to the broader understanding of face-saving strategies in political rhetoric and highlights the systematic use of language to achieve strategic politeness in contemporary U.S. presidential discourse.

Future research could extend this study by conducting a comparative analysis of euphemistic strategies across different presidential administrations or exploring audience reception to such strategies, thereby deepening our understanding of the interplay between language, persuasion, and political credibility.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Rahmatova Mehriniso Musinovna, for her invaluable guidance and support in selecting and shaping the topic of this research. I am also deeply grateful to Namangan State University for providing financial support, which made this study possible. Finally, I would like to thank my daughter for her encouragement and assistance,

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