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Euphemism in laxative TV commercials: at the crossroads between politeness and persuasion

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Abstract: Despite the stigma attached to human defecation and people's reluctance to talk about it openly, there are certain communicative situations in which one cannot evade referring to the elimination of body wastes. This is the case of laxative TV commercials, a type of discourse focused on the infrequent or difficult evacuation of the bowels that constitutes a breeding ground for euphemism. In this regard, following a socially-oriented approach to discourse analysis, politeness theory, and cognitive linguistics, the purpose of this paper is to gain an insight into the way euphemism works in a sample of contemporary American TV commercials advertising laxatives. The analysis reveals that euphemism – mostly in the form of metonymy and understatement – and non-euphemistic metaphors and similes serve as face-saving mechanisms for the company's self-presentational purposes and are ultimately used as part of a sales strategy aiming to attract the interest of viewers.

Keywords: defecation taboo; euphemism; persuasion; politeness; TV commercials

1 Introduction

Human defecation, although a normal bodily process, is surrounded by disgust, secrecy, and shame. The taboo attached to fecal elimination creates strong inhibitions against discussing defecation and related matters like constipation in public. Indeed, social and cultural conventions have traditionally banned the mentioning of bodily functions considered undignified, even degrading, like defecation or urination, not to mention burping, flatulence, or menstruation. Despite people's reluctance to talk about excretion openly, there are communicative situations in which one cannot evade referring to the elimination of body

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wastes. This is the case of laxative TV commercials, a type of discourse focused on the infrequent or difficult evacuation of the bowels. Given the need to refer to constipation and defecation in a formal context, the public nature of TV broadcasting, and the impact of regulatory constraints on the language of advertising, laxative commercials constitute a breeding ground for euphemism. In fact, we depart from the basic assumption that advertisers resort to euphemism to make the product used to induce defecation attractive to consumers despite its close association with such unmentionable topics as feces and defecation; after all, as Wingate (1997: 5) argues, "constipation is a social rather than a biological disease". It does not come as a surprise, therefore, that the taboo surrounding fecal continence compels advertisers to look for good-sounding words when trying to persuade consumers into buying laxatives.

Following politeness theory and a discourse-analytic and cognitive linguistic approach to language data, the purpose of this paper is to gain an insight into the way euphemism is used in American TV commercials advertising over-the-counter (OTC) and prescription laxatives from 2013 to 2018.[1] As euphemism is a context-bound phenomenon, this study is not based on isolated words, but on a sample of real and contextualized language use collected from TV commercials. This task seems to be a worthy enterprise because, to the best of my knowledge, no study so far has been exclusively devoted to the way euphemism serves the purpose of providing reference to scatological phenomena in real language. Leaving aside those studies devoted to the psychological or sociological implications of "toilet taboos" like feces, urine, or flatulence (Haslam 2012), the way in which the taboo of human defecation surfaces in language has only been dealt with in general studies on linguistic interdiction (Allan and Burridge 1991: Ch. 3; Ayto 2007: 163–171; Jay 2000: Ch. 23; Keyes 2010: 102–123). The scholarly works focused on the language of TV advertising are concerned with the use of language to achieve persuasive effects (Armstrong 2010; Schmidt and Kess 1986), including the role of multimodal metaphor (Caballero 2014; Forceville 2008). However, as far as I know, there is no study focused on commercials advertising products in which taboo plays a role. The present paper is organized as follows. After dealing with the taboo of defecation and the relationships between euphemism, advertising, and persuasion, I will briefly present the corpus data, the methodology followed, and the theoretical paradigms on which this study relies. Then I will analyze the euphemistic and non-

1 A distinction must be made between the so called over-the-counter (OTC) laxatives, available at the pharmacy or health store without a medical prescription, and medicines for constipation that require a medical prescription to be dispensed. It is worth noting that the United States and New Zealand are the only two countries in the world that permit DTC (direct-to-consumer) prescription drug advertising on TV, according to the American Medical Association's website (ama-assn.org).

euphemistic items, both semantically and non-semantically motivated, identified in the sample of laxative commercials consulted, which constitutes the core of this paper. The conclusions and final results will be reported in the end.

2 The taboo of defecation

Kate Burridge (2004: 199) once defined taboo as something untouchable, revolting, and unmentionable. There are, indeed, few things in life – if any – more unpleasant than excrement and defecation.[2] Although, strictly speaking, excretion is a biological process, the act of discharging waste matter from the large intestine is seen as a "private, shameful one, done behind closed doors and, except in China, never in company" (George 2008: 9). The act of defecation and, consequently, the medical condition of constipation, is surrounded by the powerful taboo of coprophobia whereby "humans are conditioned to develop an aversion to faeces" (Wingate 1997: 3) and is even associated to the fear of death (Allan and Burridge 1991: 58). Leaving aside the fetish of coprophilia, i.e., a sexual perversion consisting in deriving pleasure from the sight or smell of excrement, our extreme disgust with feces has turned the process of defecation into a potent source of repulsion and embarrassment.[3]

The physiological process of defecation is a type of what Allan (1990: 170) refers to as a "pollution taboo" which corresponds to the "revolting bodily effluvia theory" whereby excretion (and other bodily effluvia like vomit or menstrual blood) is closely associated with dirt. In this sense, the anthropologist Mary Douglas first established a symbolic connection between dirt, disorder, and danger, which leads to the assumption that human excrement, as a dirty substance, must be eliminated in the search for purity, order and social balance "as a positive effort to reorganize the environment" (1966: 2). In the same vein, for Bücher (cited in Persels and Ganim 2004: xiv) "what is decreed impure, [and] thus execrated and condemned by a culture, is an object out of place, a cause for disorder". In this sense, dirt is conceptualized as an entity which subverts an ideal arrangement of things in our world by virtue of the metaphor DIRT IS MATTER OUT OF PLACE (Lizardo 2012: 370). In fact, the experiential grounding of DIRT metaphors is based on our common experiences with certain substances – like feces – that stain

2 In fact, in a survey carried out by Allan and Burridge (1991: 74) in the early nineties among staff and students at universities in Melbourne, Australia, the top rank was occupied by shit, followed by vomit, sperm, and urine.

3 Human feces, however, are not universally regarded as repulsive. Feces have both a protective and curative power for Australian aborigines (Allan and Burridge 2006: 172). In addition, young children feel a strange fascination with feces as part of the attraction they feel towards dirt and taboo behavior (Jay 2000).

our body or clothes. From this perspective, the taboo of defecation is ultimately defined by culturally sensitive social norms whereby civilized people are supposed to keep away from dirt as a way to remain clean and pure.

The constraints governing defecation are reflected in language. Probably with the exception of scatological joking (Jay 2000: 200–201), people feel reluctant to deal with human excretion using straightforward terms and tend to soften the effect of what they really wish to communicate. To talk about defecation, feces, and related matters, people resort to *euphemism*, i.e., the process whereby the taboo is stripped of its most explicit overtones thus providing a way to speak about those experiences which are too embarrassing, disgusting, or intimate to be discussed in undeviating terms. Unlike other taboo topics like sex or death in which social censorship has progressively relaxed in contemporary societies, the act of defecation is not an easy subject to talk about in public. That this is so can be gathered from George (2008: 11):

> Sex can be talked about, probably because it usually requires company. Death has once again become conversational, enough to be given starring roles in smart, prime-time TV dramas. Yet defecation remains closed behind the words, all chosen for their clean association, that we now use to keep the most animal aspect of our bodies in the backyards of our discourse where modernity has decided it belongs.

The interdictive strength of scatological-related matters helps to explain the absence of axiologically neutral (i.e., orthophemistic) words to refer to excretion in a conversational register. Pinker (2007: 351) lists three categories of defecation-related naming, namely taboo (*shit*), medical (*bowel movement*), and formal (*excreta*, *ordure*), to which words taken from children's language (*poop*) can be added (see footnote 3). Curiously enough, there seem to be no neutral, conversational words for the natural activity of defecation. The references to excretion range from the objective and clinical discourse to the most explicit, gross, and socially inappropriate alternatives typical of teenage talk (Persels and Ganim 2004: xiii) or toilet humor (Haslam 2012). The taboo of defecation is therefore a candidate for euphemism: a wide range of apparently innocuous words and expressions are used to refer to the physiological process of defecation and related issues like constipation which, although a relatively common complaint for many people, is either silenced in public discourse or dealt with using discretion in order to avoid embarrassment and the violation of broadcast decency standards.

3 Euphemism, face, persuasion, and advertising

Prior to presenting the corpus data and the methodology following, it is necessary to define the concept of euphemism and its role in the persuasive discourse of

advertising.[4] Allan and Burridge (1991, 2006) define euphemism by reference to the notion of *face*, i.e., one's public self-image in a given social situation, first introduced by Goffman (1967) and applied in Brown and Levinson's (1987) well-known model of politeness. Following politeness theory, Allan and Burridge consider euphemism as polite-sounding language intended to soften the potential face affront both to the speaker (for self-presentational purposes) and to the hearers (out of concern for their sensitivities). In their words, euphemism tends to "avoid possible loss of face by the speaker, and also the hearer or some third party" (Allan and Burridge 2006: 31–32). These scholars place X-phemistic (i.e., euphemistic and dysphemistic) processes on the basis of a continuum based upon the degree of face affront caused by the X-phemistic verbal expression: from dysphemism as an overt face affront to the parties involved in communication, to euphemism as a means of preserving face, that is, from the overly harsh *shit* to the polite-sounding alternatives *fecal matter*; from the colloquial *do a poo* or the vulgar *take a crap* to the socially acceptable *go to the bathroom* or *maintain one's regularity*.

Face concerns play a crucial role in advertising discourse. Indeed, advertisers do not use language at random: they make every effort possible to project a positive image of the brand and the company. We should not forget that the language of advertising is "purpose-oriented": commercials are carefully constructed with a persuasive aim in mind. And euphemism is part of the advertiser's strategy to persuade potential customers into buying the products. Euphemism responds to the advertisers' need that the image of the laxative they sell be attractive and positively regarded by viewers while at the same time, not offending their sensitivities; in other words, euphemism serves the advertiser's purpose to maintain the *positive* face of the company (the viewer's negative face does not seem to be affected by the persuasive nature of advertising discourse).[5] Needless to say, the social sanction that may derive from dealing with a defecation-related subject like constipation in crude terms is precisely what advertisers try to avoid through euphemism.

Euphemism, however, is not only used to avoid the breaking of a social convention. Broadcasting regulations and standards also have an effect on the use of language in laxative commercials. Advertisers avoid words such as *shit* or *crap* not only because they are socially inappropriate but also illegal: they are

4 Following Schmidt and Kess (1986: 2), I understand by persuasion "the process of inducing a voluntary change in someone's attitudes, beliefs or behavior through the transmission of a message".

5 According to Brown and Levinson (1987: 13), the notion of face "consists of two specific kinds of desires ('facewants')… the desire to be unimpeded in one's actions (negative face), and the desire (in some respects) to be approved of (positive face)".

considered as obscene references to excretory functions that violate broadcast standards. In order to satisfy broadcasting regulations and avoid getting into trouble with the Federal Communication Commission (FCC),[6] advertisers resort to euphemism as a safe way to refer to defecation and related issues.

Although euphemistic expressions are typically polite and intended to avoid loss of face, it is important to note that euphemism is not a unified, homogeneous phenomenon because euphemism in general – and euphemism in advertising in particular – is context-bound: the attenuating quality of a given expression depends considerably on the context in which it is used (Allan and Burridge 1991: 4). Therefore, despite the fact that euphemisms are stereotypically associated with politeness (Schlund 2014: 271), we should bear in mind that the euphemistic force of any expression ultimately depends on the speaker's intention, the subject matter, and other contextually-related factors. To account for the communicative functions of euphemistic items in advertising, I consider the axiological categories of euphemism, initially proposed by Burridge (2012) and subsequently improved by Crespo-Fernández (2015), which correspond to the functions that euphemistic items perform in discourse: *protective* (avoiding offense); *consolatory* (coping with death and grief); *provocative* (attracting interest); *underhand* (deceiving and misrepresenting); *uplifting* (upgrading); *cohesive* (displaying in-group solidarity); *complimentary* (praising); *dirty* (sexually stimulating the partner); *ludic* (defusing the seriousness of taboo subjects); and *derogatory* (making a socially acceptable criticism). The euphemistic alternatives included in the different categories may provide the advertiser with different types of *politic*[7] (i.e., non-face-threatening) alternatives to dispreferred expressions, including both euphemistic and non-euphemistic references to constipation and related issues, as explained in Section 6.

4 Theoretical frames

Apart from the already commented on politeness theory as a pragmatic approach to euphemism, this study relies on a social theoretical model of discourse. From this perspective, a discourse is a framework for thinking and talking about reality, a set of assumptions which shapes people's perception of the world and

6 The FCC is an independent agency of the United States Government responsible for regulating the television, radio, and phone industries. FCC regulations include restrictions against obscenity and indecency in television and radio programming.

7 I have taken the term *politic* from Watts, who defines it as "that behavior, linguistic and non-linguistic, which the participants construct as being appropriate to the ongoing social interaction" (2003: 276).

incorporates specific values and meanings when talking about any given concept. More specifically, I follow here Fairclough's (2003) three-layered model of discourse, i.e., discourse as a piece of text, discourse as an instance of discursive practice, and discourse as an instance of social practice. Fairclough's approach combines language analysis and social theory in that it tries to "transcend the division between work inspired by social theory which tends not to analyze texts, and work which focuses upon the language of texts but tends not to engage with social theoretical issues" (2003: 2–3). This socially oriented view of discourse allows linguistic analyses of specific formal features of texts as realizations of discourse practices whose characteristics are determined by the way language and communication work, that is, by the content of the text and the form it takes (Cameron 2001: 17). From this viewpoint, texts, as instances of socially situated language use, can be considered as cultural carriers of meaning. This approach to discourse facilitates the consideration of a particular discourse type like the TV commercial as a social practice, a goal-oriented text with a predominantly social and persuasive purpose that is achieved, among other textual devices, by euphemism.

Given that figurative language constitutes a potent source for X-phemism in real discourse (see Crespo-Fernández 2015; Gradečak-Erdeljić and Milić 2011; Moritz 2018), this study is also entrenched in the tradition of cognitive linguistics (Lakoff 1987, 1993) which, simply put, considers metaphor and metonymy as cognitive devices with the capacity to provide a particular understanding of the world through the correspondence between the linguistic content of metaphors and metonymies (the source domain) and what they describe (the target domain).[8] In order to account for the communicative potential of figurative language to generate expressive, i.e., euphemistic, meanings in discourse, I follow a discourse-analytic approach to figurative language expressions, that is, a cognitively-based model inspired by Steen's (2011) approach to discourse metaphor in which social and cultural aspects play a fundamental role. Steen argues that metaphor performs a three-fold function in discourse (linguistic, conceptual, and communicative), which allows for an understanding of the deliberate use of figurative language in communication. More particularly, the approach to metonymy followed here relies on Radden and Kövecses' (1999) theory of metonymy, a taxonomy of metonymic mappings operating within an

8 Although both processes are different (metonymies link two parts of a single domain in a relation of contiguity whereby a part of a concept stands for the whole, the whole for its part, the cause for the effect, etc. whereas metaphors involve two domains in a relation of resemblance), both devices of figurative language interact in real discourse and the difference is, in many cases, a question of degree (cf. Barnden 2010: 25–27).

Idealized Cognitive Model or ICM, i.e., a conceptual domain constituted by conceptual entities (Lakoff 1987) which are based on a set of "metonymy-producing relationships" or generic principles motivating metonymic expressions.

This cognitively-based and socially-oriented view of figurative language allows us to understand the role of figurative language expressions in real-world discourse and how their axiological value and persuasive force project in communication. This discourse-analytical approach accounts for the use of metonymies and metaphors in TV commercials as cognitive devices which stand as basic means of concept and argument building and contribute to persuasion, as we will see in the course of the analysis.

5 Data and methodology

The data for the present study was taken from TV commercials advertising laxatives that are freely available for public use on the website ispot.tv (http://www.ispot.tv/), a comprehensive database of American TV commercials, promos, and movie trailers. The sample covers a time span of six years (2013–2018) and amounts to a total of 41 commercials comprising approximately 3,935 words in which 218 constipation-related references (both euphemistic and non-euphemistic) have been encountered. For the sake of minimizing variables and constructing a homogeneous sample, the study focuses on American TV commercials advertising laxatives that contain chemicals – namely emollient laxatives (e.g., Colace), osmotic laxatives (e.g., Miralax), and stimulant laxatives (e.g., Dulcolax) – as well as those advertising natural vegetable laxatives (e.g., Senokot), non-oral laxatives, i.e., enemas or medicated laxative suppositories (e.g., Fleet), and prescription medicines used to relieve constipation (e.g., Linzess). Other products used to treat and prevent constipation like probiotics or fiber supplements have not been considered.

I must admit that the present research can make no claim to being exhaustive. I have relied on small data samples, which does not allow valid conclusions to be reached in quantitative terms. However, I believe that essential principles of data compilation like the representativeness of the sample and its thematic homogeneity are ensured. Indeed, the sample of commercials meets the basic requirements for analysis in discourse studies proposed by Caballero and Ibarretxe-Antuñano (2009): it provides a sufficient (i.e., not anecdotal) number of examples from real language use and ensures that the language phenomenon under consideration is analyzed within its communicative context.

The method used to analyze the data corresponds to the adoption of a "bottom-up approach": first, I searched the database by subject area and retrieved

euphemistic and non-euphemistic words and expressions for constipation-related matters; second, I grouped these items by the specific topic euphemized and classified them in terms of their formation device; and third, I reached some conclusions regarding the role of euphemistic and non-euphemistic language in laxative commercials. The methodology used is therefore inductive: I start from the linguistic data and ask which functions euphemism fulfills in discourse. Concerning figurative language, I assigned the metonymic and metaphorical units encountered to the conceptualizations to which they give rise as a prerequisite to identify the intentions underlying the use of figurative language expressions in the sample of commercials consulted.

Before moving on to the discussion section, it is important to say that the context-dependent nature of euphemism plays a key role in the selection process of euphemism. In the first place, there are some borderline cases between euphemism and non-euphemism like *uncomfortable* 'constipated'. Although, strictly speaking, a negatively-loaded term, it clearly fulfills a euphemistic function in (9): *uncomfortable* is milder than any of its possible equivalents to refer to the taboo. Similarly, the non-euphemistic metaphorical term *burden* is relatively close to euphemism: it is regarded as a socially acceptable alternative to refer to the taboo of constipation in (17). In addition, some of the items collected from the corpus stand halfway between two or more formation devices. For instance, hyperbole combines with metonymy (*have peace of mind* 'defecate') and with simile (*like rocks* 'hard stools') and understatement and litotes are at work in a number of metonymy-based euphemisms (*irregularity* 'constipation'). In order to offer a whole picture of the language devices that result in the creation of the items collected, in cases like these I have included the euphemistic item in all the categories of X-phemism formation that result in its creation.

6 Analysis

As pointed out earlier, a total of 218 constipation-related terms and expressions have been encountered in the commercials that make up the corpus, 142 of which are euphemisms for defecation, which makes up almost two thirds of the total number of euphemistic units found. The remaining ones are euphemisms for constipation (n = 33) and fecal matter (n = 28). Non-euphemistic items for constipation (n = 15) are clearly less relevant in quantitative terms. Figure 1 displays the number and percentage of euphemistic and non-euphemistic items in each topic:

Figure 2 shows how the euphemistic and non-euphemistic units are distributed according to their formation devices. The most noticeable quality is that

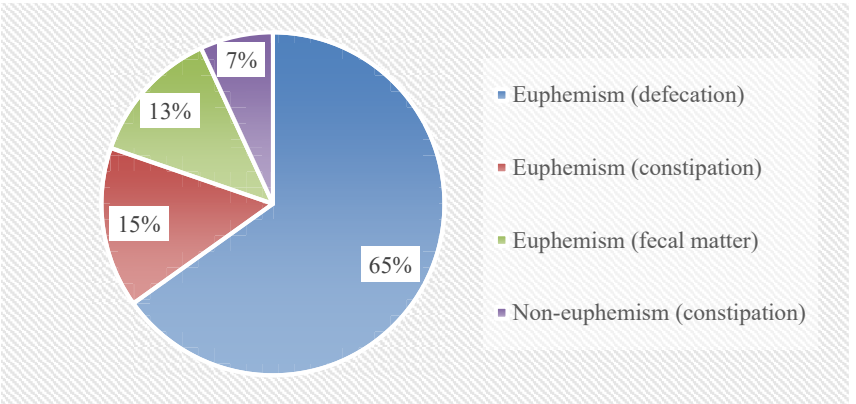

Figure 1: Euphemistic and non-euphemistic items by specific taboo topic.

metonymy is responsible for the majority of the words and expressions used to advertise the laxatives: it records 114 occurrences, including those cases in which it combines with other devices like understatement, litotes, simile, or hyperbole. Understatement (n = 90) also plays a key role as a euphemistic mechanism in the corpus consulted, followed, at a distance, by medical jargon (n = 48). Other devices like metaphor (n = 14), litotes (n = 13), hyperbole (n = 10), simile (n = 8), underspecification (n = 4), downtoning (n = 3), and personification (n = 3) are little relevant in quantitative terms.

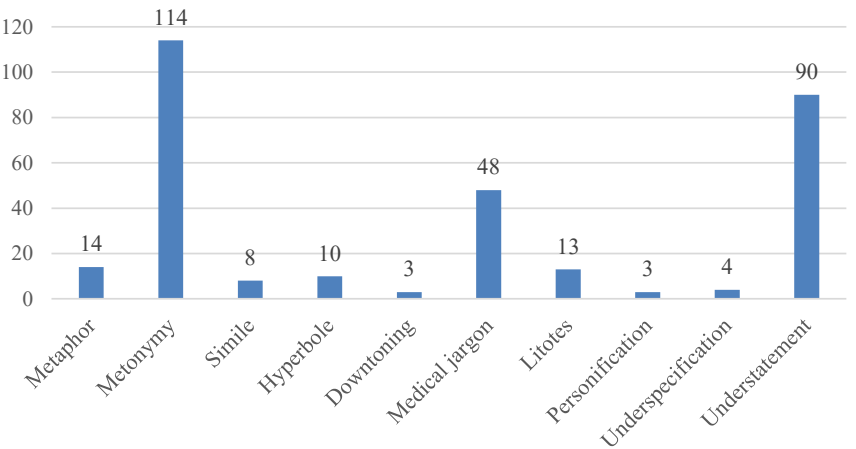

Figure 2: Devices of euphemism and non-euphemism formation in the corpus.

6.1 Euphemistic devices

Metonymy is the most frequent euphemistic device in the commercials consulted: it is at work in more than half of the total number of euphemisms found (cf. Figure 2). Metonymy imposes a particular perspective to understand the target domain "by conceptually *foregrounding* the source and by *backgrounding* the target" (Barcelona 2003: 233). This process of hiding the less appropriate elements in the target concept allow advertisers to present the reasons that speak in favor of the laxative and, in this way, make it attractive to consumers. As we will see in this section, the backgrounding force of metonymy is key in the process of encoding euphemisms insofar as "the euphemistically encoded elements in the event are metonymically highlighted but with a clear backgrounding intention" (Gradečak-Erdeljić and Milić 2011: 149). From this backgrounding force, the euphemistic power of metonymies is derived.

The act of defecation is conveyed by metonymy-based euphemisms which can be included in the metonymy RESULTANT STATE FOR ACTION, a subtype of the high-level metonymy EFFECT FOR CAUSE according to Panther and Thornburg's (2007: 257–258) hierarchical structure from abstract, high-level metonymies to more specific subtypes. This subcategory of the general EFFECT FOR CAUSE metonymy can be formulated here more precisely as RELIEF FOR DEFECATION, a metonymic association which illustrates what Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez (2011) refers to as *source-in-target* metonymies, i.e., those in which the source domain (RELIEF) is a subdomain of the target domain (DEFECATION): relief derives from (and is part of) defecation. This metonymy involves a cognitive operation of domain expansion whereby one of the subdomains of the taboo target domain of defecation, that used for euphemistic and persuasive purposes, provides full access it: the relief one feels after having defecated – especially if one suffers from constipation – stands for the act of defecation itself. This metonymy can be also considered as a PART FOR WHOLE high-level metonymy: the conceptual domain RELIEF stands for one of its parts (physical relief after defecation); in other words, we have access to the whole ICM through one of its parts.

The euphemistic items generated by the RESULTANT STATE FOR ACTION metonymy present positive overtones; hence its euphemistic and persuasive power. This is the case of terms that highlight the positive effects of the laxative as a means to persuade viewers into buying the product like *satisfaction*, *softness*, and *relief*. *Relief* is a key word in the corpus consulted: it is part of different euphemistic verbal phrases (*get relief*, *provide relief*) and nominal phrases (*gentle relief*, *comfortable relief*, *predictable relief*, *faster relief*) in which the positively loaded adjectives pre-modifying the head are intended to convey a positive image of the

brand and save the company's face. Thanks to the expansion of the conceptual material which applies to source-in-target metonymies, the viewer is aware that there is more than relief in (1): the term *relief* is a taboo-free hypernym that carries a broader meaning than its equivalent taboo counterpart (Movskin, cited in Tokar 2015: 245) and thus provides access to a more complex scene which is metonymically (and euphemistically) related to an unmentioned previous action, that of defecation:

(1) *For faster relief, try Dulcolax laxative tablets. Dulcolax provides gentle relief overnight*. (Dulcolax, 24 June 2013)[9]

The metonymy RESULTANT STATE FOR ACTION is also at play in verbal phrases like *feel the difference*, *feel great*, and *feel better* which, the same as happens with the relief euphemisms already commented on, indirectly refer to defecation by highlighting the positive effects of the laxative. In this way, these euphemistic items are halfway between the euphemistic types of protective and provocative: they aim both at avoiding offense and attracting the interest of viewers by focusing exclusively on the benefits of the product. From this viewpoint, these euphemistic items are part of the advertising technique known as card-stacking (Shabo 2008: 24–29), i.e., a selective use of facts that aims at presenting the product in a positive light. Here is an example:

(2) *Don't wait to feel great. Take the Mirolax pledge. To feel better sooner*. (Mirolax, 16 September 2013)

It is worth noting that in the metonymy-based euphemisms seen so far, the metonymy RESULT FOR ACTION combines with a GENERIC FOR SPECIFIC metonymy to contribute to the euphemistic meaning intended. By virtue of this metonymy, which illustrates a category-and-member ICM, unspecific (and taboo-free) phrases like *faster relief* and *gentle relief* (1) or *feel great* and *feel better* (2) stand for a specific situation (defecation) and thus allow reference to the taboo concept in a socially acceptable way. These phrases carry a generic meaning that is specified in the context of the commercial: the viewers are induced to believe that there is a distasteful concept underneath the signifier and opt for a plausible (euphemistic) interpretation beyond the literal meaning of the lexically coded concept. The same happens with other metonymy-based euphemisms like *backed up* and *trying* which are euphemistically related to constipation in the following commercial:

(3) *I'm so backed up. Believe me, I've been trying*. (Senokot, 7 May 2018)

9 The euphemistic items that I want to highlight in the examples are underlined. The brand's name and the last airing date of the commercial are bracketed.

Following Tokar (2015: 254–255), the GENERIC FOR SPECIFIC metonymy constitutes a violation of one of the cognitive principles of relative salience, which, as Radden and Kövecses (1999: 45) argue, "relate to three general determinants of conceptual organization: human experience, perceptual selectivity, and cultural experience". More precisely, this metonymy violates the principle SPECIFIC OVER GENERIC which relates to people's perceptual selectivity by expressing specific taboo concepts by means of abstract, generic terms. From this perspective, it is considered, following Radden and Kövecses, a non-default metonymy, i.e., a metonymic expression whose literal meaning violates one or more of the principles pointed out before. The high degree of abstraction in non-default metonymy based euphemisms like *relief* (1), *feel great*, *feel better* (2), *backed up* and *trying* (3), or, as we will see later, in a non-figurative generic noun phrase like *hard cases* (10), introduces an element of intentional vagueness and semantic indeterminacy (Chamizo Domínguez 2018; Grondelaers and Geeraerts 1998) which facilitates verbal mitigation and face-saving when applied to the context of the laxative commercial.[10]

Metonymy also combines with hyperbole in reference to the act of excretion. This happens in *have peace of mind*, an instantiation of a metonymy that we could postulate as JOY FOR DEFECATION, another reoriented version of the metonymy RESULTANT STATE FOR ACTION applied to human defecation commented before.

(4) *It hydrates, eases and softens to unblock your system naturally so you have peace of mind from start to finish.* (Miralax, 22 November 2016)

Here the emphasis given to the positive effects of the laxative basically derives from hyperbole: the elimination of body waste is associated with a joyful emotional state. The exaggerated view of the effects of the laxative that this metonymic euphemism conveys is used as a means to grab the attention of viewers by inducing them into believing that they will feel better after the intake of the product. The cognitive approach to hyperbole put forward by Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez (2011) applies here: in *have peace of mind* the source vehicle (JOY) is a hypothetical domain which contains an extreme case in a "scalar concept of situation" and the target (DEFECATION) is the real-world situation the advertiser is talking about. The extreme formulation which is implicitly accepted by the decoder of the message in the interpretative process represents defecation as an ideal emotional state rather than as a bodily process. What we have is therefore a case of the so-called provocative euphemism: its function is not so much to avoid offense as to attract the interests of potential customers.

10 As an anonymous referee points out, although advertisers have broadcast standards addressing issues such as false claims and deception, an expression like "feel better sooner" borders on the kind of indeterminacy intended to deceive viewers.

The expression *go to the bathroom* is an instance of the combination of two metonymies: first, DESTINATION FOR PURPOSE (Radden 2003: 424) which associates a destination with a specific purpose in order to refer euphemistically to the act defecation; and second, PART FOR WHOLE: an initial part of the event of defecation (reaching a place) stands for the whole event, that is, we access a part of the bathroom ICM via its whole (Portero Muñoz 2011: 141–142). As Tokar (2015: 252) argues, the act of going to the bathroom is a less relevant characteristic of the using-a-toilet scenario which involves, more importantly, the acts of urination and/or defecation. This is why this expression deliberately reverses the cognitive principles RELEVANT OVER IRRELEVANT and CENTRAL OVER PERIPHERAL (Radden and Kövecses 1999: 53). In this way, defecation is euphemized through a peripheral and taboo-free characteristic of the scenario of using a toilet which is no longer associated to its spatial meaning. As Gradečak-Erdeljić and Milić (2011: 149) put it, "the ICM created seems to be structured in such a way that the taboo elements of the ICM are placed at the peripheral part of the construed event scenario". Consider how *go to the bathroom* in (5) only triggers the taboo element of the bathroom ICM, leaving others like brushing one's teeth or washing one's hands aside, hence its euphemistic force. This happens because source and target are pragmatically associated in the specific context of this commercial:

(5) *The discomfort that your child experiences from not being able to go to the bathroom grows and grows until that small problem becomes a big one.* (Harmony, 22 September 2015)

Go to the bathroom is conventionally used to refer to bodily functions like urinating and defecating. Because of the erosion caused by its continuous use in the reference to these taboo subjects, this phrase automatically evokes the target sense: its once camouflage-like power seems to have faded away.[11] This is why *go to the bathroom* is commonly reduced to the form *go* in everyday discourse; in fact, the abbreviated form prevails over the full phrase in the corpus consulted (11 occurrences versus only 3). This process implies, as Ayto (2007: 108) argues, "an extra-euphemistic effect". What we have here, in other words, is a case of "double euphemism" in which two euphemistic processes combine: a semantic one (metonymy) and a formal one (shortening), and both devices contribute to avoiding any threat to the advertiser's face:

(6) *Dulcolax stool softener doesn't make you go. It just makes it easier to go.* (Dulcolax, 30 March 2013)

11 This process, especially relevant in PC (politically correct) language, whereby euphemisms become contaminated over time, ultimately reveals that taboo senses have a saliency that dominates and eventually suppress the protective function of euphemisms (Burridge 2015: 278).

The causation ICM gives rise to the reverse metonymies CAUSE FOR EFFECT and EFFECT FOR CAUSE, as evidenced by example (7) in which the meanings of *soften stool* and *relieve constipation* are metonymically (and euphemistically) related to the taboo of defecation:

(7) *Colace softens stool and gently relieves constipation, so you don't have to miss your moments*. (Colace, 30 January 2017)

The CAUSE FOR EFFECT metonymy underlies a euphemistic phrase like *softens stool* which derives from a mixed (non-default and default) metonymy: on the one hand, this expression violates the cognitive principles IMPORTANT OVER LESS IMPORTANT and RELEVANT OVER LESS RELEVANT: the cause (softening of stools) is far less important than the effect itself (defecation); on the other hand, it fulfills the principle IMMEDIATE OVER NON-IMMEDIATE as they appear to be motivated by an antecedent-consequence relationship: one is able to defecate because first the stools have been softened. The same type of metonymic relationship applies in *unblock your system* 'defecate' in (4). However, the phrase *relieve constipation* is an instantiation of the reverse metonymy EFFECT FOR CAUSE in which the effect (one's constipation is relieved) stands for its cause (defecation). The same happens to other euphemistic expressions like *ease one's constipation* and *ease the pain*. What we have here is a mixed (non-default and default) metonymy which fulfills the principle IMPORTANT OVER LESS IMPORTANT: the effect intended (that of relieving constipation) is more important than the cause that has provoked it (the act of defecation) although it violates the communicative principle IMMEDIATE OVER NON-IMMEDIATE (constipation is relieved after defecating).

Metaphor is also the source of euphemistic substitutions in the commercials consulted. In (8) we have a particular version of the conceptualization A PURPOSEFUL LIFE IS A JOURNEY. The journey symbolically represents progress and success through the idea of a forward movement towards a destination by virtue of the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema (Lakoff 1987: 225). This sense of movement features in the expression *running like clockwork*, which evokes forward movement as a metaphorical sign of regular defecation, an interpretation that fits within the broader body-as-machine metaphor:

(8) *As an engineer, I know how to keep complex systems running like clockwork*. (Dulcolax, 16 April 2018)

The euphemistic reading of the concept of movement can be explained if we consider the notion of main meaning focus, i.e., the major theme of the source domain (Kövecses 2006: 371). The main meaning focus of the JOURNEY metaphor is

the idea of succeeding in reaching a goal, which is completing a bowel movement (defecating) in the contexts of these commercials.

Euphemism is also achieved by non-figurative language, mostly in the form of understatement, which appears in more than one third of the total number of euphemistic units found (cf. Figure 2). *Understatement* expresses an idea as less distasteful than it really is by means of taboo-free terms or expressions that help to refer to the taboo of defecation in a socially acceptable way. Using non-specific terms as substitutes for taboo words is characteristic of understatement. Many of the positively-loaded metonymic words that appear in the corpus (*relief*, *comfort*, *regularity*, etc.) are also instances of understatement. Negatively-loaded terms like *irregularity* or *discomfort* 'constipation' and *uncomfortable* 'constipated' are good cases in point too. It is interesting to note that although words like *discomfort* or *uncomfortable* do not carry positive connotations, they are certainly milder than any of their possible non-euphemistic equivalents to refer to constipation that might bring defecation to mind in a more undeviating way; they are therefore cases of protective euphemism used to avoid offense and embarrassment. All these understatements provide evidence for the conflation of different devices of euphemism formation, namely understatement and the metonymies RESULTANT STATE FOR ACTION and GENERIC FOR SPECIFIC (see Section 6.1.1); understatement and litotes, i.e., the expression of a statement by negating its opposite; and understatement and downtoning in (9) in which *little* functions as a euphemistic pre-modifier that lessens the impact of the effect of constipation:

(9) *Sometimes life can be… well, a little uncomfortable*. (Dulcolax, 30 March 2013)

An interesting case of understatement is evidenced in (10). The noun phrase *hard cases* euphemistically alludes to the difficulty to defecate. In spite of the fact that this phrase does not carry positive connotations – the same as *small problem* 'constipation' in (5) –, it fulfills a euphemistic role in the context of the commercial: to refer to the taboo in a socially acceptable way and thus reduce the degree of potential face affront. Additionally, *hard cases* allows the advertiser to affectively engage with those suffering from severe cases of constipation in an attempt to win their favor:

(10) *It's been gently softening up hard cases for over 60 years*. (Colace, 1 March 2018)

Understatement is closely related to underspecification, i.e., the substitution of a linguistic taboo for a generic, i.e., ambiguous and indeterminate, term. The nouns *problem* in (5) and *cases* in (10), thanks to their intrinsic ambiguity, are used to refer

to constipation through a euphemistic tactic that Montero Cartelle (2018) has recently referred to as "escape through vagueness". As seen earlier, ambiguity also plays a role in GENERIC FOR SPECIFIC metonymies.

Medical jargon is also quantitatively relevant in the corpus: clinical terms are used with a euphemistic purpose in almost a quarter of the total number of items collected (cf. Figure 2). Health-care professionals resort to euphemism to refer to delicate or embarrassing issues, including unpleasant bodily excretions such as diarrhea, constipation, and related concepts like feces (Taylor 2017). The value of euphemism in medical practice, considered by many a sign of good breeding and professionalism – "the highest form of lexical diplomacy in medicine", as Tacheva (2013: 614) puts it, – should by no means be underestimated.[12] Advertisers take advantage of the power of euphemism in medical jargon as a way to present the product used to induce defecation to the target viewers. Consider the two following examples:

(11) *If you are not having normal bowel movements, you can suffer from a buildup of toxins (…). Plus you can be holding up to 4.5 lbs. of fecal weight if you only go to the bathroom once a day (…). Scientifically formulated with key ingredients to help restore normal bowel function.* (Colon Flow, 4 August 2014)

(12) *Suppositories for relief in minutes and Dulcoease for comfortable relief of hard stools*. (Dulcolax, 26 February 2018)

The phrases *have normal bowel movements* and *restore normal bowel function* 'defecate' and *fecal weight* (11) and *stools*[13] 'excrement' (12) are deemed acceptable to refer to scatological subjects in advertising discourse. Other phrases from medical jargon like *accelerate bowel movements* 'defecate' and *toxic weight* 'excrement' serve the same euphemistic function in the commercials consulted.

It is important to note that metonymy contributes to the euphemistic force of expressions from the medical field. The already seen *have normal bowel movements* illustrates the metonymy ACTION FOR RESULT in which the action that caused defecation (having normal bowel movements) is used to refer to the result of the action (defecation). This metonymy also underlies euphemistic phrases like *draw*

12 Although there seems to be no consensus as to the positive effects of euphemism in medical practice, it has been proven that patients respond more positively when their diagnosis is given in euphemistic medical jargon (Herbert 2016).

13 The euphemistic meaning of *stool* is based on a locative metonymy: it derives from *close stool* or *stool of ease*, an early form of a lavatory upon which one sat to defecate (Rees 2006: 372).

water into one's colon (13) and *stimulate nerves in one's colon* (14), in which the method used in medical practice to facilitate bowel evacuation is used to express the result event (defecation):

(13) *It works differently than other laxatives, it draws water into your colon.* (Miralax, 16 September 2013)

(14) *Stimulant laxatives forcibly stimulate the nerves in your colon.* (Miralax, 26 February 2018)

Here the causative action verbs (*draw water*, *stimulate*) stand for both the action and the result of the action (defecation), which is left implicit in the contexts of these two commercials.

Finally, in the semantically indeterminate phrase *manage your symptoms* and in the more specific *address the symptoms of constipation* (15), understatement contributes to the euphemistic potential of medical jargon:

(15) *The Harmony Study is evaluating an investigational drug for children 6 to 17 designed to potentially address the symptoms of constipation.* (Harmony, 22 November 2015)

Quotations (11) to (15) illustrate how medical jargon (sometimes in combination with other devices like metonymy and understatement) has found its way into laxative commercials as a socially correct, hence euphemistic, way to refer to defecation-related issues.

6.2 Non-euphemistic devices

As said earlier, non-euphemistic words and expressions for constipation and related topics are far less quantitatively significant than euphemistic ones in the commercials consulted. Despite this, it is interesting to look at the way non-euphemistic metaphors and similes, alone or in conjunction with hyperbole, are employed to refer to constipation. These figurative language devices play a key role in laxative advertising: they are used as a powerful way to enhance the value of the product and make it seem necessary by establishing a sharp contrast between the problems caused by constipation and the laxative as a short-term solution.

Similes achieve their effects via resemblance between two entities, the same as metaphors – in fact, the structure of similes presents an underlying conceptual metaphor – but unlike metaphors, the resemblance becomes explicit, i.e., the connection between source and target is expressed by signal words: *like* in the

quotations below. The similes encountered in the corpus fall into two conceptual associations that are closely related: CONSTIPATION IS A BURDEN and CONSTIPATION IS AN OBSTACLE. The former appears in the example that follows:

(16) *Don't let constipation weight you down like a giant red handbag!* (Miralax, 16 September 2013)

Constipation is here hyperbolically depicted as a burden in the form of a giant handbag that the person suffering from constipation finds it difficult to carry, which ultimately suggests that constipation delays, even impedes movement. Of particular interest is the use of the color *red* which symbolizes danger, fire, and blood (Allan 2009: 631); indeed, its association with blood brings to mind the striking image of the blood caused by straining to pass hard stools. The same notion of constipation as a burden is expressed in the metaphorical noun *burden* and its corresponding adjective *burdened* in the following commercials:

(17) *Did your prescription medication give you the unexpected burden of constipation?* (Senokot, 27 May 2013).

(18) *If you're burdened by belly pain and constipation and you've tried any number of laxatives, probiotics and fiber*. (Linzess, 26 March 2018)

Similarly, constipation is represented as an obstacle to movement, which is equated at a conceptual level with difficulty in starting or completing a bowel movement (sometimes disguised under the initialism BM) caused by hard stools. The reference to the obstacle that causes constipation expressed by the simile in (19) and (20) is based on hyperbole, as hard stools – the most evident symptom of constipation – are represented as rocks and bricks respectively. The view of constipation as an obstacle also features in the metonymy-inspired verbal phrase *unblock your system* 'defecate' in (4).

(19) When I *can't go it's like rocks piling up*. (Linzess, 15 March 2015)

(20) When I *can't go it's like bricks piling up*. (Linzess, 6 June 2015)

It is worth noting that although *giant red handbag*, *burden*, *rocks piling up*, and *bricks piling up* carry negative connotations, they do not function as dysphemisms in the contexts of these commercials insofar as they are socially acceptable ways to refer to the difficulty to defecate, that is, they do not pose any threat to the company's face. In addition, these non-euphemistic items are part of the advertiser's selling strategy: the viewer is more effectively persuaded into believing that the laxative can solve the terrible effects of stagnancy.

It remains to be said that personification combines with metaphor to paint a picture of constipation as a personified force acting against those who suffer from this condition in the following examples:

(21) *Fighting constipation by eating healthier? By drinking plenty of water? But still not getting relief?* (Dulcolax, 8 August 2014)

(22) *Occasional constipation can be a pretty tough customer.* (Colace, 1 March 2018)

The verb *to fight*[14] in (21) is an instantiation of the war-based metaphor CONSTIPATION IS AN ENEMY that represents the laxative as an ally in the battle against constipation, personified as an enemy that must be defeated. In the same vein, *tough customer* in (22) can be considered a materialization of a metaphor that we could postulate as CONSTIPATION IS A NUISANCE CUSTOMER whereby the difficulty to defecate is equated to the difficulty of dealing with a problematic customer.

7 Concluding remarks

The analysis of the TV commercials presented here reveals that euphemism is a common phenomenon in the language used to advertise laxatives – 203 instances in a corpus of 3,935 words – and a powerful persuasive tool in advertising discourse. Although less relevant in quantitative terms, non-euphemistic words and expressions also play an important persuasive role in laxative advertising. The relation between euphemism, politeness, and persuasion is, indeed, non-trivial: advertisers resort to politically correct alternatives to dispreferred expressions in order to mask the product's purpose and thus preserve the company's face, while, at the same time, enhancing the value of the product and allowing the potential buyer to understand their claims. In this way, socially appropriate or, following Watts (2003), politic, i.e., euphemistic and non-euphemistic, language responds to the advertisers' desire to persuade viewers to see the laxative in a positive light in spite of the reference to defecation-related issues (mostly the act of defecation and, to a lesser extent, constipation, and fecal matter) which could make them feel uncomfortable and, consequently, negatively affect the image of the brand. In this way, the euphemistic and non-euphemistic items detected in the commercials collected for this study are perfect candidates for the so-called protective and

14 The same use of *to fight* as a euphemism applies to the healing of deadly diseases like cancer, conceptualized as a feared enemy invading the body (cf. Allan and Burridge 1991).

provocative X-phemism, since their communicative functions are both to avoid embarrassment and to attract the interest of viewers.

The study demonstrates the euphemistic potential of metonymy versus other word formation devices: the vast majority of the euphemistic units detected are metonymy-based, most of which are instantiations of the metonymies RESULTANT STATE FOR ACTION (*get relief*), GENERIC FOR SPECIFIC (*pain*), and DESTINATION FOR PURPOSE (*go to the bathroom*). Euphemism is also achieved via non-figurative language: understatement (*relief*) and medical jargon (*bowel function*) rank the most frequent devices, followed, at a distance, by litotes (*unblock*), underspecification (*cases*), downtoning (*little*) and personification (*tough customer*). It is worth noting that on many occasions more than one device of euphemism formation combines to refer to defecation-related issues. For instance, metonymy coexists with litotes and understatement (*discomfort* 'constipation') and also with hyperbole (*have peace of mind* 'defecate').

It is important to say that figurative language devices like metaphor and simile, based on the conceptualizations CONSTIPATION IS AN OBSTACLE/ A BURDEN/ AN ENEMY/ A NUISANCE CUSTOMER are the vehicle for non-euphemism. In this respect, of special interest is the fact that hyperbole is used with a persuasive aim in different instances of similes (*like rocks* 'hard stools'). These non-euphemistic, hyperbolic references to constipation enhance the value of the product used to induce defecation by establishing a contrast between the problem (constipation) and the solution (laxative).

The examination of the corpus of laxative commercials also reveals that not only are vulgar words (*crap*, *shit*, etc.) avoided in advertising discourse, as can naturally be expected, socially acceptable substitutes like *defecation*, *evacuation*, or *excrement* are also avoided. However acceptable they may be in certain situations, these words are not deemed appropriate in the social context of advertising; they are considered too explicit, tinged with negative connotations and therefore likely to arouse discomfort among viewers.

It goes without saying that the present study, limited to commercials in US television, does not claim to be exhaustive. Further research is needed on the role of euphemism in a larger collection of commercials, as provided by corpus linguistics, which could allow valid conclusions from a quantitative point of view to be reached. In addition, it would be interesting to know whether the results obtained in the present paper regarding commercials on American TV differ from those broadcast in other countries. Such a study could be extended to commercials advertising other products in which taboo plays a role, like tampons, contraceptives, or dieting pills. Also of interest would be to analyze from a multimodal perspective how the different visual and linguistic choices employed in TV commercials contribute to the euphemistic and persuasive import of taboo-related advertising.

All in all, the present paper demonstrates that advertisers employ both euphemisms and non-euphemisms in laxative commercials as a face-saving mechanism which serves the company's self-presentational purposes and allows them to make the product used to relieve constipation more attractive to potential buyers without violating federal broadcast standards and regulations. In this way, politically correct language contributes to creating a positive image of the laxative and, in doing so, fulfills the purpose of advertising, namely to persuade the consumer, particularly well.

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