

ADRIANA LUCZKOWSKA
University of Silesia
Katowice

EUPHEMISTIC NAMES OF PROFESSIONS IN ENGLISH AND POLISH

One reaches for euphemism whenever s/he wants to avoid unpleasant word or topic. This is our shield against everything that is, in our view, bad and may hurt our interlocutor or us. We just try to improve imperfect world around us. Hence it is not surprising that our grey professional life should be coloured a little. The best way to do it, without going on strike, is to create unusual names for our professions. This paper focuses on euphemistic names of professions in English and Polish giving some interesting examples and showing ways of coining them.

Euphemisms as expressions used in order to avoid unpleasant or taboo words are rarely expected to appear in other contexts than these referring to socially unacceptable topics. However with our crave to censor everything that may appear offensive we may soon be left with no inoffensive topics. This paper pays attention to euphemistic names of professions used in English and Polish. Examples are mainly taken from existing dictionaries of euphemisms. In English they were compiled by Holder (1995), Neaman and Silver (1983), Ayto (2000), Rees (2006). In Polish such dictionary was compiled by Dąbrowska (1998). This is, to author's knowledge, the only dictionary of Polish euphemisms therefore we added examples which appeared in Bańko (2002), Smółkowa (1998 – 2006) and job advertisements published in *Gazeta Wyborcza*. Source of each quoted example is given in the tables 1.1 and 1.2 in round brackets.

Names of our occupations seem to be neutral but many people find them degrading. That is why they coin new names for their professions. Sometimes they just create word combinations and sometimes 'invent' new words. In English and in Polish one of the reasons why people started to look for alternative names is political correctness. As Pyles and Algeo (1964) say, sentimental equalitarianism has led us to attempt to dignify humble occupations by giving them high-sounding titles: thus a *janitor* has in many parts of America become a *custodian*, and there are many engineers who would not know the difference between a calcula-

tor and a cantilever (Pyles and Algeo 1964: 249). Another reasons are feminist movement and probably our vanity. If you want to impress your hearer (or maybe yourself?) you can always say: 'Please contact my *personal assistant*' instead of plain *secretary*.

As Rees (2006) points out 'PC tries to protect special interest groups from insensitive language – even if the groups themselves often couldn't care less how you talked about them' (Rees 2006: 4). Here we can include women. It is very difficult to decide whether PC or feminist movement had greater impact on creating new names as both draw attention to the unequal treatment of males and females not only in life but also in language. In order to fight with masculine-centered words people started to look for words referring to both sexes. Therefore *fireman* or *spokesman* became improper words clearly discriminating women and the need for creating neutral names appeared. Allan and Burrige (2005) indicate that since the 1970s there have been issued a large number of guidelines for non-sexist language usage in private and public institutions, government offices, etc. Speakers and writers are advised to choose a gender neutral alternative to the generic use of *man* when referring to *human being* in general, to prefer *chair* or *chairperson* to *chairman*, *supervisor* to *foreman*, etc. (Allan and Burrige 2005: 111). Not all of the coined 'substitutes' were successful. For example *flier/flyer* for an *airman* or *airwoman* according to Rees (2006) did not become popular. Although many of gender neutral words were accepted and are widely used Allan and Burrige (2005) observe that 'individuals differ greatly in their attitudes to the terms listed dysphemistic; a number of women are quite happy to be *Madam Chairman*, because they understand the word *chairman* as an idiom denoting the office of chairperson' (Allan and Burrige 2005: 111).

While analysing Polish one could say that thanks to our highly inflectional language we partly managed to escape this problem of masculine-ended words. Of course we do have some names of professions with only masculine endings where creating feminine word is impossible. One reason is that in the past feminine variation of given word was used to indicate wife of a man who held certain post. Another is that words with feminine ending have different connotations. For example *pilotka* apart from referring to a *woman pilot* or a *woman guide* is also a *soft helmet*, and it is probably most often used in this third sense. Many woman pilots or guides therefore prefer to refer to their occupation using word with masculine ending. For example they say

- (1a) Jestem pilotem wycieczek.
'I am a tour guide (MASC.)'

instead of

- (1b) Jestem pilotką wycieczek."
'I am a tour guide (FEM.)'

- (2a) Jestem pilotem.
'I am a pilot (MASC.)'

instead of

- (2b) Jestem pilotką.
'I am a pilot (FEM.)'

This is only one of many examples when women use masculine nouns while talking about their profession. One explanation is that these words, just like this discussed above, may be ambiguous. Another is that they could be underrated. Not all women are pleased with sex-discriminating names and would prefer neutral alternatives. As such are hard to coin in Polish they use either form. Also in English Allan and Burridge (2005) notice that it might be thought that terms suffixed *-ess*, and others such as *lady/woman doctor*, should be acceptable to a female referent; but it is widely perceived that women referred to using such terms are less highly valued than their counterparts, therefore the terms are dysphemistic and the neutral alternatives are preferred for a female referent (Allan and Burridge 2005: 111).

It seems that name makes us greater in our own eyes. Although it will not change the kind of work we perform or the way our supervisors treat us while talking to others we prefer to give the euphemistic name of our post. Therefore *teachers* prefer to call themselves *educationalists*, *undertakers* – *funeral directors* and so on. However not everybody is willing or sees the need to change name of their profession. Nigel Rees (2006) gives an example of *flueologist* for a *chimney sweep*, which as the author says was 'a brave but failed attempt to enhance the status of this trade' (Rees 2006:153). In Polish one did not hear about such an attempt either because nobody tried to do it or because, just like in English, it was not successful. The former seems more likely as Poles believe that if one sees a chimney sweep they will be lucky. That is why they are respected by people and do not need to improve their 'image' by acquiring new name.

However not everybody is so lucky. And just like in English also Polish *undertakers* need to look for new words to make their job less straightforward. We have new word to describe person working in funeral parlour namely *funeralista*. For the time being it is not widely used but maybe it will be accepted. Nonetheless it is an interesting hybrid. It was created by adding Polish suffix to English word *funeral*.

As one can see in table 1.2 and in the example above one way to create a euphemism is reaching for another language. As Adams (1985) points out foreign languages used to, and occasionally still do, provide evasion devices. Latin was retained in translations of ancient texts when one wanted the reader to work so hard deciphering it that all obscene pleasures would be obliterated by labour of translation. [...] Foreign languages reciprocate sometimes by using English expressions where the explicit term in their own tongue would be either unrespect-

able or illegal (Adams 1985:52). And, as we could add, when we want to create 'better' name for our profession. Great example of such use of English in Polish is *night manager* used instead of *stróż nocny* (night watchman). Another example may be word *pizzaman* for a cook who can prepare pizza. Here we have two words from foreign languages used in order to coin word which, probably in eyes of the employer, should draw attention of future employee.

pizza (*Italian*) + man (*English*) = pizzaman

While *pizza* was adopted by Polish some time ago and probably is an international word for this dish it is intriguing that owner of this restaurant did not use Polish suffix to create name for such a cook but decided to use English word *man*. One may only guess that he did it because of the widespread 'popularity' of English. However the most important point here is that this word elevated an ordinary cook to a specialist who knows how to prepare proper pizza and thus created new euphemism. It is hard to say now whether people will accept *pizzaman* and start to use it, but if so one can expect that this word may be a euphemism for a very short time and will become a proper way of referring to a cook who prepares pizza. Though it seems ridiculous that we should call cook depending on the dish he prepares, with our love to name everything and everybody without proper name it may soon be reality. One just hopes that no *golonkaman* appears.

In many Polish job advertisements appear English names of posts. Most common are probably *sales representative* and *human resources manager*. Because we have Polish names for these jobs use of mentioned names is clearly euphemistic. They are used in order to catch reader's attention and colour a little bit post which in fact will not be as important as the name may indicate. Unfortunately none of the sources in English gave examples of employing foreign language in order to coin a 'better-sounding' name of a post.

People, aware of the power of word, try to change names of their professions to make them sound more important. It seems that their inventiveness is unlimited. For example a *hairdresser* has several names. As Nigel Rees (2006) notes in American English person of this profession is called *appearance engineer*, in British English *ladies' hairdresser* is called *hair stylist* (more examples in table 1.1). Also in Polish we can often come across the name *hair stylist* in posh salons. But thank God Poles do remember that they have their own language and without help from other languages are able to coin their own astonishing names for different professions. For example instead saying that one looks for *sprzątaczkę* he/she gives an advertisement that *konserwator płaszczyzn poziomych* is needed. This is one of the longest Polish names for a representative of certain profession. In most cases we prefer one- or two-word names, though this may soon change. As Allan and Burridge (2005) observe the mode of addressing or naming exaggerates the importance of Hearer-or-Named by magnifying their perceived or pretended higher social status. Today it is often those in the lower ranks that get the longest titles, e.g. the Personal Assistant to the Secretary (Special Activities) for "cook" (Allan and Burridge 2005: 105).

Nowadays political correctness seems to spread around the world and probably in all languages one could find some 'soft word' used in place of other. Unfortunately people sometimes appear to lose their common sense in their willingness to follow this 'linguistic fashion' and improve everything, even already good terms. Feminists who always fought for women rights voice their dissatisfaction with language and pass their propositions for new words referring to different posts held by women, employees coin names for their professions to elevate their importance and employers invent names for different posts to make them sound more attractive than they really are. It appears, as Pyles and Algeo (1964) point out, that 'one of the great concerns of the democratic and progressive age in which we live would seem to be to ensure that nobody's feelings shall ever be hurt – at least not by words' (Pyles and Algeo 1964: 249).

People seem divided when it comes to use of better-sounding names of their professions. Some adopt them immediately, some do not. But as Jeremy Lewis (1985) noticed in his article on office life 'since it takes up so much of our time, it's hardly surprising that we wheel out an arsenal of euphemisms to describe what we're up to, and to make ourselves feel more important than we really are' (Lewis 1985: 97).

In both discussed languages the process of creating euphemistic names of professions is underway. Therefore this paper does not claim to exhaust the topic nor to quote all existing examples of such names because it would be impossible. It should be treated as an attempt to present interesting linguistic phenomenon. As one could observe there are different ways of finding an alternative name for our profession. We may use 'well-sounding' words, mix languages, create neologisms, borrow expressions from other languages and so on. Only limitation, as it seems, is our linguistic taste and imagination.

Table 1.1

ENGLISH
aisle manager – floor-walker (E)
ambient replenishment assistant; stock replenishment executive – a shelf-stacker in a supermarket (RN)
appearance engineer <i>AmE</i> – a hairdresser (RN); hair stylist – a ladies' hairdresser (in the UK) or barber (in the US); (a men's) hairdresser – a barber (RN)
background actor – extra actor (AB)
badge <i>AmE</i> ; bill; blue, bluebottle, bluebird, blue-belly, blue man, blue jeans, blue and white <i>AmE</i> ; bobby <i>BrE</i> ; bogy obsolete <i>BrE</i> ; bull <i>AmE</i> ; busy <i>BrE</i> ; button <i>AmE</i> ; collar <i>AmE</i> ; cop; copper; dick <i>AmE</i> ; flatfoot; frog; jack; john <i>AmE</i> ; John Law <i>AmE</i> ; limb (of the law) <i>AmE</i> ; man in blue, bluecoat <i>BrE</i> ; noddy <i>BrE</i> ; peeler; penny ?obsolete <i>AmE</i> ; pig offensive; plod; polar bear; runner obsolete; Sam <i>AmE</i> ; shield <i>AmE</i> ; smokey <i>AmE</i> (H); law enforcement officer/official; plod; police officer (RN) – policeman
bar assistant/attendant/lady – a barmaid (RN)

business executive – anyone who earns his/her living (RN)
canine control officer <i>AmE</i> ; dog warden – a dogcatcher (RN)
captain – an airline pilot (RN)
chair/chairperson – chairman (RN)
charlady; daily woman – a charwoman (RN)
cleansing personnel – garbage collectors/road-sweepers (RN); <i>AmE</i> waste-reduction manager; sanitation worker/engineer; waste manager; waste management worker; garbologist; <i>BrE</i> refuse collector; cleansing/refuse operative; environmental cleaner (AJ); refuse disposal operative (RN) – dustman
collaborative pianist – a piano accompanist (RN)
commercial traveller (RN); traveller (AJ); representative (AJ) – a travelling sales representative
commission agent – a bookmaker (RN)
community nursing officer – a district nurse in the UK, also in the US (RN)
company representative – a spokesman (RN)
consultant – a salesperson (RN)
customer operations leader – a senior conductor (RN)
daily (woman); home/daily help; cleaning lady, dinner lady, tea lady – <i>BrE</i> servant (AJ)
destination manager – a travel agent (RN)
<i>AmE</i> dining-room attendant, catering service personnel, waitron (AJ), waitperson (RN) – a waiter/waitress
dispatch room facilitator – a post room helper (RN)
domestic; domestician – a servant in the home (RN)
domestic engineer – a housewife (RN)
domestic assistant/help(er)/operative; staff; <i>AmE</i> domestic worker, help – servant (RN/AJ)
educator – a teacher (RN)
executive – a boss, a manager, any businessman (RN)
extermination engineer – an exterminator of pests and vermin (RN)
family butcher; meat dealer/man/purveyor/ technologist – a butcher (RN)
firefighter – a fireman (RN)
flier/flyer – an airman or airwoman; never really caught on (RN)
flight attendant – an air steward/stewardess (RN)
flueologist – a chimney sweep (RN)
footwear maintenance engineer – person who cleans shoes in the US Senate (AJ)
funeral director/furnisher; mortician – an undertaker (RN)
funeral service operatives – undertakers' assistants (RN)

gentlemen of the press – newspaper reporters en masse (RN)
green carder – a foreign worker who has “legal alien” status in the US (N/S)
guest worker; <i>AmE</i> seasonal employee/worker – migrant worker (AJ)
help – a servant (RN)
horticultural surgeon – a tree trimmer (<i>in the US</i>) (RN)
housekeeper – a chambermaid (RN)
infestation officer – a rat catcher (RN)
lady – a cleaning lady, domestic help, a woman in a subservient role (RN)
landscape technician – a gardener (<i>in the US</i>) (RN)
men in white coats – doctors and orderlies (esp. from mental hospitals) (RN)
multimedia systems technician – a film projectionist (<i>in the US</i>) (RN)
office cleaning operative – a cleaning lady, charwoman (RN)
part-time merchandizer – someone who sells things part-time from door to door <i>AmE</i> (AJ)
personal assistant/P.A. (RN); <i>AmE</i> administrative assistant (AJ) – a secretary
pest(-)control officer; vermin exterminator (RN); rodent officer/operative/operator/(AJ) controller; exterminating engineer (AJ) – a rat catcher
prison officer/warder – a gaoler/jailer (RN)
professor – a school teacher; mostly in the US (RN)
public health inspector (AJ)/officer (RN) – a sanitary inspector
purser – a buffet-car steward on British railways (RN)
purveyor – a seller (RN)
refuse collector/refuse disposal operative/refuse operative – a dustbin man, dustman (RN)
revenue agent – a tax inspector (<i>in the US</i>) (RN)
revenue protection inspector/officer – a ticket inspector (RN)
road mender; workman – navy (AJ)
sales lady – a shop assistant (RN)
sales representative – a salesman (RN)
sanitary engineer – a sewage worker (RN)
sanitary warden, sanitary man (for males) – public lavatory attendant (AJ)
sanitation maintenance superintendent – a janitor (<i>in the US</i>) (RN)
senior conductor – a guard (on British railway trains) (RN)
skilled farm technician – a farm worker (RN)
special (constable) – a part-time policeman (RN)
spin doctor – a public relations practitioner or political aide who puts a positive interpretations upon events (RN)

spokesperson – a spokesman (RN)
station manager – a (railway/train) station master (RN)
stockist – a shopkeeper (RN)
street orderly – a street/road sweeper (RN)
supplier – a shopkeeper (RN)
tax inspector – a taxman (RN)
tonorial artist – a barber, hairdresser (RN)
trade union member – a worker (RN)
train manager – a senior conductor, formerly guard (RN)
turf accountant – a bookmaker (in horse racing) (RN)
underemployed/underutilized person – person who does not hold a job commensurate with his ability; less euphemistically referred to as overeducated (N/S)
undocumented worker – illegal foreign worker (N/S)
vendor – a seller (RN)
victualler's assistant – a barmaid (RN)
water systems specialist – a plumber (in the US) (RN)

Table 1.2

POLISH
area manager (Polish equivalent regionalny kierownik sprzedaży) (GW)
blacharz <i>informal</i> ; błękitny chłopiec; niebieski; glina/gliniarz <i>informal</i> ; pan władza/pani władza <i>informal</i> ; Smurf; Władek <i>neologism</i> – policeman (D)
district manager (Polish equivalent dyrektor oddziału) (GW)
dozorca – janitor (D)
dziewczyzna – young unqualified female worker (D)
factory manager (Polish equivalent kierownik fabryki) (GW)
financial controller (Polish equivalent kontroler/rewident finansowy) (GW)
florysta – florist (GW)
funeralista – funeral parlour worker (TS)
Gastarbeiter – guest worker (uzus)
gospodarz domu – janitor (D)
human resources manager (Polish equivalent kierownik działu personalnego) (GW)
klawisz <i>informal</i> ; śledź <i>neologism</i> – gaoler (TS)
kobieta do sprzątania; pani sprzątająca – cleaning lady (D)
kolporter materiałów reklamowych – someone who delivers leaflets (GW)

konserwator płaszczyzn poziomych ^{formal} – cleaning lady (D)
konstruktor odzieży – designer (GW)
konsultant – salesperson, especially one who sales cosmetics (uzus)
konsultant telesprzedaży – telesales operator (GW)
manager oddziału bankowego – bank manager (GW)
manager sprzedaży – sales director (GW)
nauczyciel przedszkolny ^{formal} – nursery school teacher (D)
night manager – night watchman (TS)
pedagog ^{formal} – teacher (uzus)
pizzaman – cook who prepares pizza (job advertisement I saw in a restaurant)
pomoc/pomocnica domowa – domestic help, usually one who does not live with family but comes during day (D)
pomoc kuchenna – kitchen maid (D)
pracownik MPO – garbage collector (D)
projekt manager – kierownik budowy (GW)
przedstawiciel handlowy – sales representative
rzemieślnik – entrepreneur (D)
shop manager (Polish equivalent kierownik sklepu) (GW)
służący – servant (D)
specjalista d/s sprzedaży – person selling goods [<i>previously commercial traveller, now probably any salesperson</i>] (GW)

(AB) – Keith Allan and Kate Burridge

(AJ) – John Ayto

(D) – Anna Dąbrowska

(E) – D.J. Enright

(H) – R.W. Holder

(GW) – Gazeta Wyborcza (06. 2007)

(N/S) – Judith S. Neaman and Carole G. Silver

(RN) – Nigel Rees

(TS) – Teresa Smólkowa

AmE – American English

BrE – British English

UK – United Kingdom

US – United States of America

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