

## **Euphemism and Dysphemism in the War-on -Iraq Discourse**

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**Abstract:** *The paper explores the use of euphemism and dysphemism in the war-on-Iraq discourse as found in a small number of relevant documents and news reports. A quadrant of euphemizing and dysphemizing is identified. Positive representation of self and negative representation of other are the realizations of the strategic functions of legitimizing and deligitmizing and these are, in turn, important tools of war propaganda and counter-propaganda*

### **1. Introductory Remarks**

War time is a perfect time for language use and abuse and also an important index to what we really are. Much of what goes on before, during and after a war is linguistic. Identity is usually “forged in conflict,” and discourse marks “our path to, through and out of war and peace” (Nelson, 2002, 3). In this context, certain strategic functions are performed by political discourse as elaborated by Chilton and Schaffner (1997,212–3), who distinguish four functions characteristic of political discourse in general: (i) coercion, e.g., laws, edicts, commands, censorship, agenda setting and “making assumptions about realities that hearers are obliged to at least temporarily accept”; (ii) resistance, protest, and opposition, e.g., slogans, chants, petitions, rallies and appeals that oppose existing power structures; (iii) dissimulation, i.e., diverting attention from troublesome and controversial issues; and finally (4) legitimization and delegitimization.

To represent a political cause or a war as just and legitimate, politicians and allied media may use metaphors and metonymies (e.g., Lakoff, 1991, 1994, 2001), presuppositions (Mazid, 1999), semantic mapping and remapping (Ilie, 1998), to mention only some strategies. Fairclough (1992) identifies four levels of text analysis which carry political or ideological significance: vocabulary, grammar, cohesion and

text structure. At the level of vocabulary, we may look at the choice of wording (e.g. 'freedom fighter' vs. 'terrorist'), as well as hyperbole and euphemism, 'overlexicalization', revalorizing of words to give positive connotations (e.g., 'nigger' or 'queer' among certain users) and metaphor.

Euphemism belongs to the broader linguistic practice of double-speak or double-talk. A euphemism is a word or phrase that is used in place of a disagreeable or offensive term. Based on Warren (1998), Ham (2001), Farghal (1995) and Wikipedia (2003), euphemisms may be divided into several categories. The following is a representative list:

- Foreign Terms, e.g., "derriere", "copulation", "lingerie"
- Indirections and Circumlocutions, e.g. "unmentionables"
- Description of the Word, e.g., "the f-word"
- Longer Words, e.g. "urinate"
- Word Formation Devices: compounds, e.g., "hand-job" for "masturbation"
- Derivation, e.g., "fellatio"
- Onomatopoeia, e.g., "bonk" for the sexual act
- Abbreviations and Acronyms, e.g., "SOB" for "son of a bitch"
- Phonemic Modification and Morphological Remodeling: back-slang, e.g., "enob" for "bone";
- Rhyming Slang, e.g., "Bristols" for "breasts" ;
- Replacement, e.g., "shoot" for "shit";
- Mispronunciation "freakin" for "f.k..g"
- Semantic Innovation: overstatement, e.g., "fight to glory" for "death"
- Understatement, e.g., "sleep" for "die"
- Particularization, e.g., "innocent" for "virginal"
- Reversals or Antonyms, e.g., "enviable disease" for "syphilis"
- Implication, e.g., "available" for "sexually easy"
- Metaphor, e.g., "globes" for "breasts"
- Metonymy and Abstraction, e.g., "it" for "sex"
- Omission, e.g., dots ..... and stars in lieu of an undesired word

There are two opposites of euphemism: dysphemism and cacophemism. The latter (i.e. cacophemism) is generally used in the sense of "something deliberately offensive," while the former can be either "offensive" or "merely humorously deprecating" (Wikipedia, 2003, WWW). Examples of dysphemism include the American military's use of "shit on a shingle" for their common breakfast of creamed chipped beef on toast, (Wikipedia, 2003, WWW). Dysphemism may function as an outlet to anger, a means of abuse, or an indication of social distance (Burrige, 1999, WWW). It could be "offense-centered," "praise-centered," or "interaction-centered" (Mateo & Yus, 2000, 114.). It should be pointed out, however, that the distinction between the categories referred to above is not maintained in the present study.

The study of euphemism has so far concentrated on stereotypically sensitive areas such as disease, death, sex and toilet habits – that is probably why it has not received a lot of “academic” attention. Farghal (1995) provides four categories of euphemism: figurative expressions, remodelings, circumlocutions and antonyms and analyzes some examples of euphemism in Arabic based on the Cooperative Principle a la Grice. The analysis is restricted to the taboo areas and sensitive topics listed above.

The two wars on Iraq, 1991 and 2003, in addition to the “hunting down” of bin Laden and the war on the Taliban “regime,” seem to have resulted in an upsurge of interest in the analysis of political discourse and an extension of the study of euphemism into political and military double-talk. Pilger (1993, WWW) provides a list of new political euphemisms:

another Hitler // last year's moderate, now threatening US interests (e.g. Saddam Hussein) // democracy // system that allows the people to vote for their leaders from among a set cleared by the political investment community // victory // annihilation.

On the other hand, Feldmann (2003, WWW) makes some immediate and profound remarks on America’s wars on Iraq:

The first Persian Gulf War added ‘the mother of all battles’ to the lexicon. In the second Gulf War, journalists are ‘embedded’ with American and British military units, in a war, officially dubbed ‘Operation Iraqi Freedom,’ the ‘coalition of the willing’ sought to end fast with a campaign of ‘shock and awe’ that would eliminate Iraqi ‘weapons of mass destruction.’”

Feldmann notices the deceptiveness of euphemisms such as “liberation” and the many alternatives of “war” that the Bush administration has been using: cf.

// "broad and concerted campaign, // " "tearing down the apparatus of terror," // “decapitation operations”, // “confronting dictators.”

The Pentagon not only invented its own euphemisms but also fought to strip some Iraqi terms of their euphemistic connotations as was the case with “fedayeen.” In a directive to Army units in Iraq, the term “fedayeen” - which translates to “those who sacrifice themselves for a cause” - was banned. Instead, they were to be called “paramilitary fighters,” or PMF.

By the start of the war's second week, they were "paramilitary death squads."

### 1. Present Study: Objectives, Data and Methodology

The present paper explores some instances of euphemism and dysphemism in the war-on-Iraq (March-May, 2003) discourse: how they index some of the ideologies and attitudes of the parties involved, most importantly the US and Iraq, and how they were used as an integral part of their weaponry.

The data of the present study consists of some news stories from different Anglo-American newspapers and news agencies randomly selected and taken from the Yahoo! News website. The Arabic data is taken from the URL [www.babelioline.net/news4.htm](http://www.babelioline.net/news4.htm), Al-Jazeera.net, some Arab news sites and the websites devoted to the former Iraqi Minister of Information. The major instances of euphemism and dysphemism are identified with some comments on their potential pragmatic and ideological functions. The analysis, divided after Allan & Burrige's (1991) metaphor of language as "shield and weapon," is predominantly qualitative. It is obviously difficult to quantify on the basis of one person's perception and interpretation of euphemisms and dysphemisms in a randomly selected number of media texts.

The background of the sample texts is the war on Iraq, starting with a "decapitation attack," March 19, and lasting till President Bush said Iraq combat was over, May 1, 2003.

### 3. Language as a Shield

#### 3.1. American Euphemisms

One major theme in the US administration's war propaganda is the euphemistic representation of the military operations in Iraq as liberation. In the ultimatum speech to his "fellow citizens" (Appendix B1, B4 & B5), Bush talks about the ultimate objective of the war, namely, the "liberation" of Iraq: cf.

- We will tear down the apparatus of terror and we will help you to build a new Iraq that is prosperous and free.
- The day of your liberation is near.
- ... to advance liberty and peace in that region
- Americans are fighting in Iraq as liberators, not conquerors.
- .... toward the goal of liberating Iraq

Roy (2003, WWW) makes a very sarcastic remark on such promises and on the US dubbing of the war as Operation Iraqi Freedom:

- Perhaps he means that even if Iraqi people's bodies are killed, their souls will be liberated.
- It's more like Operation Let's Run a Race, but First Let Me Break Your Knees.

In this sense, liberation becomes a euphemism, in the form of reversal or antonymy, of invasion and occupation. The euphemism combines with a number of presuppositions that we have to take for granted: that there had been an old, ill-off, suppressed Iraq, that there had been an apparatus of terror ruling over Iraq and that that Iraq had not been vital, peaceful, or self-governing.

In their joint statement on the war, Bush and Blair uphold their euphemisms of liberation and their promises of a free, prosperous Iraq (Appendix B: 9): cf.

- After years of dictatorship, Iraq will soon be liberated.
- For the first time in decades, Iraqis will soon choose their own representative government.
- .. where Iraqis can determine their own fate democratically and peacefully
- .. to help the people of Iraq build a nation that is whole, free and at peace with itself and its neighbors
- We look forward to welcoming a liberated Iraq to the international community of nations.”

Another theme has to do with the neutralization of the assault on Iraq. It is represented as a “conflict” between the US, leading the “free world,” and Iraq. Bush describes the imminent war, euphemistically, as a conflict: cf.

- Their refusal to do so will result in military conflict
- In any conflict, your fate will depend on your action
- Americans understand the costs of conflict

The term “conflict,” compared to “attack” and “assault,” blurs the boundaries between the victim and the victimizer. In most Anglo-American media, the war has been represented as a war “with Iraq,” “against Iraq” (Appendix B: 3) and as “a war in Iraq,” “conflict in Iraq” and “crisis in Iraq.” A multitude of prepositional euphemisms has been used to masquerade reality. The preposition “in” simply locates the war in Iraq, without making any reference to agency or responsibility, while “against,” like “with,” divides the guilt of war between the attacker and the attacked. In reality, it was “a war on Iraq” – a phrase comparatively less common than the others.

Neutralization fades into a clouding of responsibility for the war, which is realized in either of the following, other themes:

(i) deagentialization of developments leading up to the war and attribution of its causes entirely to the deposed Iraqi “regime” ( a transitivity euphemism, representing an action as an event, as something that just “happens” (van Leeuwen, 1995: 97)): cf.

- “events in Iraq have now reached the final days of decision” (Appendix B:1

(ii) endowing events with an agency of their own, as if the US had not forced those events to reach “the final days of decision” and as if the decision to go to war had not been taken very long ago. The Bush administration did “everything” to avoid going to war: cf.

- “the United States and other nations have pursued patient and honorable efforts to disarm the Iraqi regime without war”;

- “Peaceful efforts to disarm the Iraqi regime have failed again and again” (Appendix B: 1)

The efforts are euphemistically described as “patient” and honorable” and diplomatic and warless. In addition, those efforts simply “failed” – another agency euphemism: cf.

- “The United States and other nations did nothing to deserve or invite this threat”

The threat had been imposed on the US and other nations. The nominal phrase “this threat” is a more profound euphemism. The Bush administration even provides a preemptive rationale for potential atrocity and mass destruction. This is where the theme of representing annihilation as an obligation comes in:

- Yet, the only way to reduce the harm and duration of war is to apply the full force and might of our military” (Appendix B: 1).

This is an obvious euphemism for the use of the most deadly weapons in destroying the Iraqi army.

All through, a division is instituted between the moral and political commitment of the US, which is still another major theme in Anglo-American euphemisms, the lack of commitment on the part of the UN and the silent countries and violation on the part of the Iraqi regime and its “terrorist allies.” Thus, in the ultimatum speech (Appendix B:1) Bush produces the following X-phemissms (words/phrases realizing

euphemisms are italicized and citations will be followed by brief comments):

- (1) As we enforce the *just demands of the world*, we will also honor the deepest commitments of our country.

**Comment:** These must be the “just demands” of the US world. Moreover, a euphemistic “we” at the beginning of the statement masquerades the fact that Bush is representing his administration and only a portion of his country and only a minority of the world population.

- (2) The United Nations Security Council has not lived up to *its responsibilities*, so we will rise to ours.

**Comment:** The UN Security Council failed to authorize the American invasion. Many are becoming increasingly aware that the UN is only a euphemism for the handy tool of the powerful to subjugate the powerless (Roy, 2003, WWW)

- (3) Should Saddam Hussein *choose confrontation*, the American people can know that every measure has been taken to avoid war and every measure will be taken to win it.

**Comment:** “Confrontation” is represented as one of the options available to Saddam. For the Iraqi people and for many Americans and Britons, yes, but for la cream de la cream of the world at large “every measure seems to have been taken by the US not to avoid war”.

- (4) If we must begin a *military campaign*, it will be directed against the *lawless men* who rule your country and not against you.

**Comment:** The conditional sentence combines a modal of obligation and necessity, “must,” a euphemism of the war as a “military campaign” and a attributive adjective (i.e. *lawless*) that delegitimizes the “men who rule” Iraq.

The vocabulary of moral necessity and obligation also appears in the joint statement made by Bush and Blair during the war (Appendix B: 9). They promise that

- “coalition forces will *remain in Iraq as long as necessary*.”

The phrase “remain in” is obviously a euphemism for “occupy” and “as long as necessary” for “as long as we need.” A transitive, effective verb, “occupy,” is replaced by an intransitive verb, “remain,” followed by a circumstantial of place, rather than a helpless patient. Moreover, it is not only something important; it is a moral duty that the US remains in Iraq. The implication that it is a moral duty remains there even when the war is over (Appendix B: 11).

The war was a “commitment” and a “duty” ; it was “imposed” on the US as a “response” to Saddam’s “uninvited” threat to the world and the UN’s failure to act. Having fabricated the threat and condemned the silent

and the weak, the Bush administration and allied media sought to establish a consensus through a euphemization of the few countries that went to and/or supported war

- *Many nations*, however, do have the resolve and fortitude to act against *this threat to peace*.
- .. and *a broad coalition* is now gathering to enforce *the just demands of the world*.

**Comment:** The coalition is described as “broad” although countries as big as France, Germany, China, and Russia did not support the war.

- *As our coalition* takes away their
- It is not too late for the Iraqi military to act with honor and protect your country by permitting *the peaceful entry* of *coalition forces* to eliminate weapons of mass destruction

**Comment:** American lethal weapons are weapons of “peaceful” liberation while Iraqi weapons are weapons of mass destruction.

Here and there, “co-“ in “coalition” functions as an indicator of consensus and a reminder of the obviously more legitimate 1991 war on Iraq. The mainly Anglo-American arsenal has been referred to as “allied forces” (Appendix B: 3), “coalition forces” and “coalition hands” (Appendix B: 4, 5, 7. Elsewhere, another euphemism adds to the list – “coalition of the willing.” While no one seems to have made any comment on the prepositional euphemisms, the “coalition” semantic field has come under sever criticism and sarcasm. More fitting labels have been suggested: cf.

- “coalition of the bribed and coerced,” (Arnove , 2003, WWW)
- “Coalition of the Bullied and Bought.” (Roy , 2003, WWW)

The basic vocabulary of Bush’s warlock recurs in most pro-war Anglo-American discourse, and so do the major euphemisms. Thus, in the second text (Appendix B: 2), there is a criticism of the UN inspection team, more specifically of Blix and Al-Baradei, for failing to be decisive enough, and of the UN for failing to “call in the cavalry to get the job [of disarming Iraq] done.” “[T]o disarm him [Saddam]” presupposes that there were/are arms and thus depicts the goal of the war as a response to a threat caused by Saddam's arsenal. In this sense, disarming becomes a euphemism in the form of an understatement, for destroying and toppling Saddam and his “regime. And here again, we are reminded that Bush did not “want” to go to war; it was Saddam’s “defiance” and the UN’s failure “to live up to its responsibilities”: this failure seems to have “invited” President Bush “to take the undesirable step of going to war.” Part of the UN “failure” lies in the behavior and personality of the two “big” guys in the inspection team, euphemistically criticized as “mild-mannered civil servants,” and their moves dysphemistically described as “games of hide-and-seek.”

The war on Iraq has left us a legacy of buzzwords, catchphrases, clichés, slogans and an endless source of humor. There is also the famous “shock and awe” (Appendix B: 4). Whether or not the Bush administration meant the biblical overtones of the phrase is a moot point. Yet, the phrase is very significant in giving Bush a divine status in his “war” against the “evil” represented this time in the “Satanic” Saddam.

There seems to be no end to the euphemisms generated by the US-led assault on Iraq. The following examples are self-explanatory:

- *surgical strikes* : a metaphorical euphemism where the US is the surgeon, Iraq, the patient and Saddam, the tumor
- Iraqi “(*pockets*) of resistance” – an understatement of defense
- *friendly fires* : an oxymoron beautifying stupid mistakes and rationalizing fratricide, reported by media persons who were mostly “embedded” with military
- *WMD*: an acronym euphemism for “weapons of mass destruction,

Most of the examples cited above belong to the last theme identified in the US euphemisms – magnification of the coalition’s endeavor and achievements and trivialization of Iraqi defense. The other sides of these processes are the downplaying of the coalition’s losses and mistakes and the magnification of Iraqi losses and collapses. The Iraqi response was somehow unexpected, given the war propaganda disseminated by the US. The response is referred to as “Iraqi resistance in the south” (Appendix B: 5) and their fighting is described as skirmishing:

- At the outskirts of Basra, Iraq's second-largest city, coalition forces *skirmished* with Iraqi troops (Appendix B: 7).

The coalition forces’ inability to capture Basra is euphemized as an option:

- They surrounded the city and *opted not to try to occupy it*.

When the Iraqis are agents, they are not mentioned:

- Two have died in combat, the rest in helicopter crashes. (Appendix B: 7).

This must have been the case since most Anglo-American media reporting the war was “embedded.”

### 3.2. Iraqi Euphemisms

At the beginning of the war, the Iraqi radio talked about “the march of struggle” (Appendix B: 3), which is as empty and euphemistic as the old “Mother of all Battles” and the new label “maʿrakat il-Hawaasim” – “War of Decisive Battles,” or simply “the Decisive Battle”. Things are what people choose to call them. The Iraqi regime kept many in Iraq and

elsewhere under the spell of labels and epithets, referring to, and also tapping nostalgic consciousness of, a history of wars and a glorious past and calling its soldiers as well as common Iraqis as :

- "nashaama," "?abTaal," "maajidaat," "mu?miniin," "mujaahidiin," "munaaDiliin" and "Saabiriin" (These respectively translate into "brave, valiant men," "heroes," "glorious/noble women," "believers," "fighters" and men of patience).

Invocations of Pan-Arabism and appeal to religion were combined in official Iraqi discourse during the war:

Victories of our army go on and on. Every day, in fact, every hour a new achievement is made revealing the truth about Iraqi heroism, deep-rooted in our souls, and at the same time revealing the weakness of our enemies and uncovers their foolish bare-facedness and demonstrate them as humiliated losers, facing the great Iraqi people and its army. (An Iraqi official statement on the war, [www.babelioline.net/news4.htm](http://www.babelioline.net/news4.htm), March 24, 2003).

Former Iraqi Minister of Information, Al-Sahaf, spoke very euphemistically throughout the war: cf.

1. He talked about "Iraqi fighters," while maintaining his verbal aggression on the "aggressors

- Those Iraqi fighters, those heroes at Umm Qasr, are teaching the American and British invaders a lesson.
- Those Iraqi fighters are slapping those gangsters on the face, and then when they flee, they will kick their backsides. (most probably, "backsides" is the reporter's euphemism for "butts"),
- "The aggressors have retreated after they were taught a lesson and after they incurred many losses" (Appendix B: 7).

2. He kept blaming the coalition forces and their media for lying and distorting reality and took pride in the honesty, transparency and truthfulness practiced and advocated by his deposed government:

- *Lying is forbidden* in Iraq. President Saddam Hussein will tolerate nothing but truthfulness as he is a man of great honor and integrity. Everyone is encouraged to speak freely of the truths evidenced in their eyes and hearts" ([www.Sahaf.com](http://www.Sahaf.com)).

3. He talks about the sons of Iraq, the fighters ("munaaDiliin") of the Socialist Arab Ba'ath Party, the enthusiastic, zealous ("ghayaara") sons of Iraq, joined by Arabs and Muslims. They would defeat the criminal America and its tail, Britain, with the assistance of Allah, and shame ("? al xizy") and disgrace ("? al 'aar") would be the destiny of the evil aggressors" ([www.babelioline.net/news4.htm](http://www.babelioline.net/news4.htm)). The religious and nationalist banners were reinforced by self-glorification, the promotion of self-sacrifice for the sake of religion and national dignity and an emphasis on such traditional values as shame, courage

and heroism. The official military release already cited above makes the following statements referring to Iraqi soldiers:

- They confirm their belief in Allah by 'jihad' in defense of His religion and to protect their land, their sky, their noble women ("Haraa'ir") and children and their bright future with a courage unprecedented in the history of wars,
- To this end should the mujaahidiin fight and strive
- ?allaahu ?akbar...?allaahu ?akbar...?allaahu ?akbar (Allah is Great)
- wal Hamdu lillaahi rabbi l ?aalamiin ... naaSiri l mu?miniina l mujaahidiina SSaabiriin" (And praise be to Allah, Sustainer of the Worlds and He Who helps the patient, faithful mujaahidiin gain victory) ([www.babelioline.net/news4.htm](http://www.babelioline.net/news4.htm)).

The same tendency toward waving the banners of religion manifested itself in other Arab and Muslim discourse on the war outside Iraq. Thus, Hamas leaders urged Iraqis to:

- "carry out suicide bombings against invading U.S. and British forces in Iraq,"
- "confront them with all possible means, including *martyrdom* (suicide) operations to blow up their *blessed bodies* amid *the new aggressive crusader forces*."

Um Adel, a woman holding an Iraqi flag in Gaza City, said:

- Saddam is *the only honest and heroic Arab leader*. All the others are cowards and collaborators with the Americans" (Appendix B: 6).

A strong appeal to religious motives is manipulated here – "martyrdom," "blessed" and "crusader."

## 4. Language as a Weapon

### 4. 1. Iraqi Dysphemisms

Most of the dysphemisms of the war on Iraq seem to have come from the former Iraqi leadership as well as Arabs and Muslims defending Iraq (Appendix B: 3). Yet, the strongest, most colorful and most controversial dysphemisms came from ex-minister of information, Al-Sahhaf. Some of his dysphemisms demoralizing and demonizing the attackers and reported in Anglo-American media are:

"criminal George Bush and his gang," / "superpower of villains," / "We will not allow them to get out of this quagmire which we trapped them in," / "Those are mercenaries," / "Most probably they will be treated as mercenaries, hirelings and as war criminals" (Appendix B: 4).

Varied and countless as they are the dysphemisms against the coalition and the political leaderships supporting it could be categorized into three categories:

(1) accusation of madness, irrationality and stupidity. Examples include the following (by Al-Sahaf):

- “taafihah w ghabiyyah” (trivial and stupid) (description of Powell’s proposals for sanctions on Iraq) (Al-Jazeera.net, Feb. 27, 2001),
- “?aghbiyaa?” (stupid), // “mutaxallifuun” (retarded) , // “Hamqa” (foolish) (his indictment of the “invaders”). ([www.Sahaf.com](http://www.Sahaf.com))

(2) (anti-)colonialist labels: Examples include:

- “ghuzaah mu?taduun” (aggressive invaders) (Al-Jazeera.net, March 20, 2003),
- “?al ghuzaah ?al ?ashraar” (evil invaders), “?al musta?miriin al xasi?iin” (losing imperialists) ([www.Sahaf.com](http://www.Sahaf.com));

(3) representations of individuals as animals and association with trivial, base objects: The following are by Al-Sahaf:

- “xafaafiish” (bats) , // “mantooj ?amriiki faashil” (an unsuccessful American product) ( describing the Iraqi Opposition negotiating the post-Saddam Iraq (Al-Jazeera.net, August 3, 2002 ).
- “?uluuj” (blood-sucking worms, zebras or wild donkeys, or infidels af?a” , // ”Hayyah” (a snake), // “quT?aan” (hordes or flocks of sheep and cattle), ?? “jHuush il ?isti?maar” (jackasses of colonization) – which refers to Arabs and Muslims supporting the war ).

The above labels respectively associate with deception and poison, gullibility, stupidity and the passion for blood.

(4) depicting the “invaders” as enemies of God, as unbelievers fighting believers, e.g.,

- “?allaah sa yashwi buTuunahum fi nnaar” (God will roast their stomachs in hell) (Al-Sahaf)

(5) depicting the invaders as violators of international law and villains in the world drama: Al-Sahaf’s colorful list includes:

- “murtazaqah” (mercenaries) , // “mujrimuu Harb” (war criminals), // “?awghaad” (villains/bastards) – which, in some of its senses, mean “sticky, stupid, or weak guys” and “humiliated servants” , // “?iSaabat il ?awghaad iddawlyiin” (gang of international villains/bastards), (Al-Jazeera.net, March 20, 2003) , // “?al ?udwaan ?al ghaashim” (the brutal assault) ([www.babelioline.net/news4.htm](http://www.babelioline.net/news4.htm)),

(6) depicting the “imperialists” as hopeless, desperate losers and shameless liars trapped in Iraq: e.g.,

- “They’re coming to surrender or be burned in their tanks” ([www.Sahaf.com](http://www.Sahaf.com)), // “waqa? il mat?uus ?ala xaa?ib irrajaa?” (the

company of the miserable and the desperate, or the lame and the blind) (Al-Jazeera.net, August 3, 2002).

#### **4.2. American Dysphemisms**

In his ultimatum speech (Appendix B:1) Bush seeks to demoralize and demonize Saddam and his rule through a succession of dysphemisms. The following examples are self-explanatory:

- “because we are not dealing with peaceful
- The regime has a history of reckless aggression in the Middle East
- ... it has aided, trained and harbored terrorists, including operatives of al Qaeda
- ... it will be directed against the lawless men who rule your country and not against you
- The tyrant will soon be gone.
- ... and we will not be intimidated by thugs and killers
- .. he will remain a deadly foe until the end
- .... some chose to appease murderous dictators
- ... when evil men plot chemical, biological and nuclear terror

This is an ideal profile of “a deadly foe.” Saddam is represented as irrational – “reckless,” illegitimate – “lawless” and “regime,” repressive and cruel – “tyrant” and “dictator,” evil, aggressive and inhuman – “aggression,” “thugs and killers,” “murderous” and “terrorist.” Since 1991, Anglo-American media has depicted a nightmarish image of Saddam and has excluded him as the negation of “us” and the evil other (Rojo, 1995). The verbal blows and stigmas targeting him have often been wrapped in a religious discourse of evil versus faith, peace and justice. Moreover, these blows and stigmas have been combined with reminders of the 9/11 traumatic experience to generate more hatred in the hearts of Americans towards the “dictator” and “his terrorist allies” . In addition, allusions to notorious “tyrants” and “dictators” have always been an important device in the process of demonizing Saddam. Bush’s “appease murderous dictators” is an obvious reminder of Hitler and the vocabulary used to describe Saddam throughout, with the exception of the “terrorism” semantic field, is stereotypically associated with such rulers as Hitler, and Stalin.

#### **4. Discussion and Conclusion**

A quadrant of verbal downgrading and upgrading, of demonization and beautification, might have been detected in the very selective data analyzed. The Bush administration generated a large number of

euphemisms to represent its attack on Iraq not only as just and legitimate, but also as a moral commitment, a humanitarian act. To this end, the ugly face of war has been covered by a shield of semantic innovations and transitivity euphemisms, to mention only the most frequent types. The unpleasant details have to be backgrounded to maintain the image of the US as the land of freedom, justice, and progress and the disinterested arbiter in the New World Order and to secure the tax-payers' satisfaction. Benefit-promising, to use Rank's (1978) terminology, is foregrounded at the expense benefit-seeking. Language is here used as a sugar-coat, or what Orwell (1946) describes as "a defense of the indefensible."

Meanwhile, and to add legitimacy to the attack, the Bush administration has been demoralizing the deposed Iraqi regime with a number of dysphemisms that downplay its good and intensify its bad, to cite Rank(1978) again.. Almost nothing good is attached to Saddam's "regime," but the coalition and the media "embedded" with it occasionally pay at least lip-service to the cultural heritage of the Iraqi people. The US dysphemisms of Saddam and his "allies" are obviously not as boisterous, not as innovative, as those of Al-Sahaf. They are rather serene and, in a sense, quite predictable. Labels and epithets such as "tyrant," "dictator," "brutal regime," "murderous," "foe," "terrorist," "evil" and "'enemy" have been in the air since the famous 9/11. As far as their aim is concerned, these dysphemisms are offense-centered (Mateo& Yus, 2000) – they are used to communicate the Bush administration's opinion about Saddam and his allies. The ultimate goal of the offense is not merely to hurt the victim, but to damage his reputation and to represent him as an evil-doer. The demonization of Saddam by Anglo-American media began after his invasion of Kuwait. He came to be represented as "barbarian," the negation of us, the utter Other (Rojo, 1995). Slogans such as "no blood for oil" waved in anti-war demonstrations in the US itself suggest that many were aware that Bush was not an angel fighting a devil for the sake of justice, freedom and peace in the Middle East. However, a massive war was waged on a whole country and language was an important weapon in paving the way for the war, in sustaining the fears, the illusions and the promises and in hunting down Saddam and his loyalists after the war.

On the Iraqi side, Al-Sahaf was in charge of fighting the US Empire and its "allies" with what Reuters, March 31, 2003, called "fiery abuse" – demoralizing the "invaders" and omitting the upsetting details and facts about the Iraqi "regime". Al-Sahaf's in-the-face slurs and insults, his skill in using Classical Arabic and Iraqi slang and in tapping cultural consciousness, his ability to deny the most obvious, his triumphant smile

and his presentational talents have already produced a literature of interpretations and commentaries. His dysphemisms are obviously more offense-centered and more abusive than those of the “enemies.”

The last component of the downplay/intensify quadrant is that which relates to Iraqi euphemisms of their “victories” and of the heroic character of the deposed Saddam. Most of these are couched in classical Arabic rhetoric and reminiscences of the Arabs’ glorious past, adorned with citations from the Quran and evoking notions of heroism, honor, shame and greatness of the Iraqi leadership and people. For many, these euphemisms were only too funny to have any real impact on anyone. It remained, however, an important part of the political legacy of the Iraqi regime. According to Bengio (1998), language, history and myth were crucial “mechanics of indoctrination.”

The quadrant of euphemism and dysphemism identified above is identical with van Dijk’s (2000, WWW) “conceptual,” or “ideological square.” He formulates the overall strategy of ideological discourse as follows:

*Emphasize positive things about Us and negative things about Them; De-emphasize negative things about Us and positive things about Them.*

This overall strategy, as suggested in the theoretical part of this study, is a “brutal” violation of the Cooperative as well as the Politeness Principle.

Many questions remain unanswered. Yet, one thing is certain: language has come to the foreground, used and abused and its transparency murdered, both by the Bush administration and Saddam and his “allies”; however, the connections between communication, politics and power have become more transparent than ever. This is not, of course, everything about the war-on-Iraq discourse. Other analytical tools and other texts and talks should reveal more about the interactions between language, politics and power in the US-Iraq relationship. On the other hand, a broader semiotic perspective, combining the visual and the verbal and exploring the different, ideologically-revealing ways in which different satellite channels and websites represented the war, will add to our understanding of those interactions.

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## Appendix (A): Transcription Conventions

In transcribing examples and extracts from the sample Arabic data, the study uses the following symbols – in addition to the common English phonetic alphabet: ? : voiceless glottal stop; j : voiced palatal fricative; H : voiceless pharyngeal fricative; x : voiceless uvular fricative; sh : voiceless palatal fricative; S : voiceless pharyngealized fricative; ~~187~~ d : voiced pharyngealized plosive; T :

voiceless pharyngealized plosive; ʕ: voiced pharyngeal fricative; gh: voiced uvular fricative; q: voiceless uvular plosive; w: voiced bilabial semi-vowel; y: voiced palatal semi-vowel

**Appendix (B): Citation of Texts Analyzed in the Language as Shield Section (Yahoo! News, unless otherwise indicated)**

1. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/03/20030317-7.html>, March 17, 2003: President Says Saddam Hussein Must Leave Iraq within 48 Hours - Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation;
2. N (ew) Y(ork) T(imes), February 15, 2003: Disarming Iraq;
3. NYT, March 19, ٢٤-٠٣-٢٠٠٣: U.S. Calls Decision by Hussein His 'Final Mistake';
4. A(ssociated) P(ress), March 21, Friday, 2003: U.S. Begins Massive Air Assault on Iraq;
5. AP, March 21, Friday, 2003: Anti-war sentiment flared in the United States and around the world;
6. Reuters, March 21, Friday, 2003: Hamas Urges Iraqi Suicide Attacks on US-Led Forces;
7. CNN, March 23, 2003: Iraqis put up fierce fight at Umm Qasr;
8. *USA TODAY*, March 21, 2003: Invasion strikes emotions of Sept. 11 victims, families;
9. [www.INQ7.net](http://www.INQ7.net), Tue April 8, 2003: Bush/Blair: 'Iraq Will Soon Be Liberated';
10. NYT, March 22, 2003: Rumsfeld Says Iraq Is Collapsing, Lists 8 Objectives of War;
11. AP, Jun 23, 2003: U.S. Announces Creation of New Iraq Army.