The Euphemisms Chapter: Sex and Bodily Euphemisms on Screen and in Song

Expressions like go down on and blow job are much more familiar to audiences than cunnilingus or fellatio. Sleep together, go to bed with, and make love to sound so much less serious—and certainly less clinical—than copulation. To wank or jerk off is linguistically much more common than to masturbate, and menstruation is invariably substituted by expressions such as period or that time of the month. Genital names are commonly replaced with euphemisms ranging from the childish to the crude; likewise, gay and queer are heard much more frequently than homosexual. As psychologist Timothy Jay noted in his book Why We Curse, “the sheer abundance of euphemisms for sex is a good indication of how important it is for speakers to talk around the topic.”¹

Euphemism comes from the Greek euphemia, meaning “words of good omen” and, more commonly, “to speak well.” While in contemporary parlance the use of euphemism is often about sugar-coating, in practice this is not always the case: euphemism can also be used to neutralize politics or negativity, to confuse, to conceal meaning, and to outright deceive. Euphemism is often considered a form of spin, used notably by politicians, bureaucrats, and advertisers to package something—an idea, a policy, a product—as attractive through disingenuous or manipulative means. Such linguistic trickery is, of course, nothing new; its systematic and highly politicized use is thought to have its origins in George Orwell’s novel Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949), where “newspeak” was the new language imposed by the state to restrict the lexicon, eliminate gradations of meaning, and, ultimately, control thought.
According to linguists Keith Allan and Kate Burridge, the English language offers more than 1,000 euphemisms for \textit{penis}, 1,200 euphemisms for \textit{vulva/vagina}, and 800 euphemisms for \textit{intercourse}. As Jay contended, clearly sex is a topic we find complicated to discuss. This complexity is borne out of reasons including embarrassment, conservatism, and fear of offense, and resultantly euphemisms are used to temper subjects perceived as difficult. This chapter explores examples of, and rationales for, sex-themed euphemisms. Such euphemisms are often deployed for predictable reasons such as avoiding offense and tentatively broaching taboo topics, but there are also other rationales whereby the intent is to shock, to titillate, to dissociate, and to be humorous.

\textbf{THE SUGAR-COATING OF LANGUAGE}

Sugar-coating is the most obvious explanation for euphemism: to make something sound nicer or less offensive than a franker, more clinical description—something that Burridge refers to as a \textquoteleft linguistic deodorizer.\textquoteright. Numerous rationales can be cited for such sugar-coating. This section examines two of them: (1) consideration of one's audience and (2) personal prudishness.

\textit{All about the Audience}

The most obvious rationale for euphemism use is being mindful of one's audience. That \textit{there are children present} or \textit{ladies present} is often used as shorthand for the assumption that some audiences need shielding from certain language; some audiences are viewed as less worldly, less mature, and less able to cope with more explicit descriptions. The toning down of language for children is a very obvious justification for euphemism: \textit{urine}, for example, often becomes \textit{wee wee} or \textit{tinkle}, \textit{potty} replaces \textit{toilet}, and \textit{penis} becomes \textit{pee pee}. This issue was discussed in a 1969 \textit{Time} article on euphemism: \textquoteleft Housewives on television may chat about their sex lives in terms that a decade ago would have made gynecologists blush; more often than not, these emancipated women still speak about their children’s ‘going to the potty.’\textquoteright

Out of fear of embarrassing, offending, or ostracizing an audience, dialogue may be tempered: as Dr. House (Hugh Laurie) explained—after using a barrage of euphemisms for masturbation on \textit{House} (2004–2012)—\textquoteleft I was trying to be discreet. There’s a child in the room!\textquoteright Tempering language because of children is similarly well illustrated in an episode of the sitcom...
Full House (1987–1995). Youngest daughter Michelle (Mary-Kate Olsen/Ashley Olsen) complained that her uncle Jesse (John Stamos) and aunt Becky (Lori Loughlin) weren’t playing with her as much as usual. Michelle’s other uncle, Joey (Dave Coulier), explained their absence, alleging that Jesse and Becky “were doing their taxes”:

Michelle: Are they going to be doing their taxes every night?

Joey: For the first few months, yes.

Joey assumed that his niece was too young to be told that her newlywed aunt and uncle were busy having sex, so instead he used doing their taxes as a child-friendly—and, given the target audience for the show, audience-friendly—euphemism for sex. In the Gay Chapter, I discussed the humor in animation often doing double duty and courting both adult and children audiences; the Full House scene is an example of this practice where the euphemism is funny for the knowing adult viewer and harmless for children.

Being mindful of an audience is particularly well illustrated in advertising, whereby the most everyday objects get sugar-coated to avoid offense: bath tissue, for example, often substitutes for toilet paper; feminine protection and feminine hygiene substitute for sanitary napkins and tampons. In 2010, Kotex actually tried to desist with euphemisms and used terms including vagina in a commercial. Three networks refused to air the commercial, so it had to be reshoot using the euphemism down there. The decision by these networks highlights that vagina is a word that is assumed to conjure offense and, therefore, needs to be spoken about cryptically. Predictably, euphemisms for vagina abound on screen. The word vagayjay, for example, stemmed from pressure imposed by media watchdog groups who complained that vagina was used too often in Grey’s Anatomy (2005–); a euphemism was concocted to counter this demurral, which then quickly entered the popular lexicon.

While on screen women’s anatomy and associated products are often spoken about euphemistically, this trend actually extends to all sex-themed words and ideas. Television commercials for the erectile dysfunction drug Enzyte, for example, predictably eschewed the words penis and erection and instead offered a variety of euphemisms, including big boost of confidence, natural male enhancement, living large, and a generous swelling of pride. Such euphemisms are suggestive to a knowing audience but avoid offense by being (comparatively) subtle.

While euphemisms for genitals are offered for a number of reasons, as identified in this section, the sugar-coated euphemism is considered appropriate for a general audience.
Being Prudish

While the hypothetical mother in the Time article discussed earlier might have moderated her language for her children, another explanation is that she did so because she was loath to use language that she considered dirty or uncouth. When “rude” words or subject matters are found embarrassing—particularly by women—euphemisms may be deployed as part of a self-preservation strategy. In an episode of *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), for example, the following dialogue was exchanged between friends Charlotte (Kristin Davis), Samantha (Kim Cattrall), and Carrie (Sarah Jessica Parker):

Charlotte: Is it so much to ask that you not wear your dress up around your See. You Next Tuesday?

Samantha: My what?

Charlotte: See … you … next …

Carrie: Tuesday? Oh my god, was that a *Schoolhouse Rock* I missed?

Charlotte, a character portrayed throughout the series as prudish, often did use the word *vagina*, but the fact that she eschewed it in this scene demonstrates that *see you next Tuesday* served not as a euphemism for *vagina* but rather as a euphemism for *cunt*. Charlotte evidently could not bring herself to say that word, but the euphemism allowed her to say something more biting than *vagina.*

While Charlotte’s choice of language was likely attributable to her being comparatively conservative, a connected explanation is that her usage of this euphemism was part of her efforts at impression management; in other words, her language choice was used to manipulate how she was perceived by others. This idea is something discussed by communications theorists Nancy McCallum and Matthew McGlone: “Euphemism provides a method for discussing sensitive topics, as it allows users to representationally displace topics that evoke negative affect by avoiding direct reference to them.” Euphemism allows Charlotte the opportunity to use a word with vulgar connotations without actually *being* vulgar. Charlotte’s efforts to use language to manage her façade highlight another rationale for sex-themed euphemism: psychology.

**EUPHEMISM AND PSYCHOLOGY**

A central motivation for euphemism use is to put space between oneself and an idea. There are numerous psychological reasons why this might be done; two that I propose in this section relate to (1) putting distance between
the self and something considered too horrible to speak about explicitly and (2) self-esteem rationales. Both of these reasons have notable applicability to a discussion of sex.

Euphemism and Dissociation

While news reports readily use euphemisms to discuss rape—indecent assault, carnal knowledge, attack, and abuse, for example—the use of euphemism by victims is particularly relevant for this section, highlighting some of the psychological underpinnings of euphemism use. When linguistic anthropologist Shonna Trinch undertook research with women who had experienced domestic violence, she noted that 80 percent who had experienced marital rape had used euphemisms in their descriptions. Psychologists Judith Parker and Deborah Mahlstedt, in their work on rape, similarly noted that victims “use a variety of linguistic resources to manage their (un)willingness to acknowledge their sexual assault.” By using euphemisms, a distance can be established between the victim and the word rape and all of its taboo, inflammatory, and emotional connotations and judgments.

One reason why a victim might eschew the word is to avoid becoming a rape victim; in essence, by not explicitly naming the rape, a person is able to avoid the label of victim and, therefore, avoid the identity, possible blame, and stigma. This idea is highlighted well by a rape victim quoted in legal theorist Patricia Eastal and Louise McOrmond-Plummer’s book Real Rape, Real Pain: "Saying ‘I was raped’ felt equal to proclaiming ‘I have no dignity.’ If I did not say the word, I could retain at least the pretense of dignity.” By using a euphemism, a rape victim can conjure an identity that is separate from her attack; language, therefore, becomes part of a coping mechanism. Examples of such dissociation are readily detected in music. Rape is explicitly mentioned in a number of songs: 2Pac’s “Baby Don’t Cry (Keep Ya Head Up II)” (1999), Belle and Sebastian’s “The Chalet Lines” (2000), Korn’s “Thoughtless” (2002), and Amanda Palmer’s “Oasis” (2008), for example, each refer to rape by using the actual word. More common, however, is rape discussed via euphemism. There is a long history of creative works skirting around difficult topics; rape is one example where euphemisms invariably substitute for frank, clinical, and frequently upsetting descriptions.

The Stone Temple Pilots song “Sex Type Thing” (1992) is a first-person narrative song seemingly about date rape (“I am a man, a man / I’ll give ya somethin’ that ya won’t forget / I said ya shouldn’t have worn that dress”). Rape is not mentioned explicitly in the song; instead, the title exists as a
typical example of an equivocating euphemism used by rape victims. Ann, a woman quoted in psychologist Nicola Gavey’s research, reflected on unwanted sex; in doing so, she used an example of an equivocating euphemism:

I was saying to my friend, Kelly, the other day, it was amazing how … we weren’t raped as teenagers, you know, like the things we used to do. And then I thought, well we were sort of raped, really, when you think we were driven off in cars and we would end up in the park somewhere and we would have sort of boys having sexual experiences with us that we didn’t—We often—like it was quite disgusting ...

In this quote, Ann is hedging through euphemism. Parker and Mahlstedt define such hedging, identifying that it occurs when a speaker “modulates the impact of her own utterances by using a word or phrase … By using such terms as kind of, sort of, maybe, I think and others, a speaker can moderate the strength or weakness of an utterance.” The woman in Gavey’s research—much like the title of the Stone Temple Pilot’s song—used euphemism to hedge and equivocate, reflecting the difficulty victims have in labeling their crime. Sex type thing facilitates dissociation but also muddles the events, thereby highlighting one of the central problems with using euphemism in the context of crime.

In the song “Summer Nights” from the film Grease (1978), the boys sing about Danny’s (John Travolta) interactions with Sandy (Olivia Newton John), asking, “Did she put up a fight?” Putting up a fight is a common euphemism used to reference sex refusal and can be identified in women’s real-life recollections of rape. In Jim Wood’s book The Rape of Inez Garcia, he recounted the story of Garcia who was tried for killing her rapist in 1974. In her recollections, Garcia told the court: “I was scared that if I might put up a fight that I might have been killed or stabbed … I let them use me.” The very same euphemism was apparent in a rapist’s discussion of his crime quoted in psychoanalyst Sylvia Levine and Joseph Koenig’s work on rape: “So she was naturally, crying, and putting up a fight and we carried her out to the cornfield.” In such examples, rape doesn’t need to be spoken; put up a fight is a euphemism used frequently to imply rape.

Tori Amos’s “Me and a Gun” (1992)—a song drawing heavily on Amos’s own rape—uses phrases such as “a man on my back” and “spread[ing]” but eschews mention of the actual word. Motörhead’s “Don’t Let Daddy Kiss Me” (1993) takes the rape euphemism a few steps further by dubbing it the “world’s worst crime” and “his seed is sown where it should not be.”
theatrical rape euphemisms are used in Emilie Autumn’s “Gothic Lolita” (2006), where the rape is described as “The kind of murder where nobody dies,” and in The Offspring’s “Kristy, Are You Doing Okay?” (2008), where “innocence left behind” and “what was taken away” are the chosen euphemisms. These examples are particularly interesting because they use emotive, heartstring-tugging language to highlight the seriousness and devastation of the rape, but simultaneously avoid the explicit, close contact that actually using the word would bring; the rape is dramatized without being discussed frankly.

In Ludacris’s song “Runaway Love” (2007), “tryin’ to have his way” is the chosen euphemism for rape. This phrase is similarly deployed in The Dresden Dolls’ song “Delilah” (2006): “The stupid bastard’s gonna have his way with you.” Have his way also appears in real-life descriptions; in one woman’s testimony she explained: “He lay on top of me and started physically abusing me . . . he threatened to kill me if I wouldn’t let him have his way.”¹⁷ A similar euphemism—done his thing—appears in women’s real-life stories. A victim quoted by Parker and Mahlstedt, for example, offered this description: “He grabbed me, then started taking my pants off, and then he done his thing.”¹⁸ Have his way and done his thing are substantially softened ways to speak of rape: they offer a watered-down description of a heinous crime, facilitating dissociation but also, problematically, presenting a possibly less harsh judgment of the perpetrator (an idea returned to at the end of this chapter).

While it could be contended that euphemisms are used in these songs for censorship or creative reasons,¹⁹ they also demonstrate situations where a rape victim attempts to avoid having identity shaped by her victimhood and where a rapist attempts to dissociate from a crime. These applications are indicative of how euphemisms are often instrumental in manipulating identity.

Euphemism and Identity

In the aforementioned Time article, it was contended that “certain kinds of everyday euphemisms have proved their psychological necessity”: “A girl may tolerate herself more readily if she thinks of herself as a ‘swinger’ rather than as promiscuous. Voyeurs can salve their guilt feelings when they buy tickets for certain ‘adult entertainments’ on the grounds that they are implicitly supporting ‘freedom of artistic expression.’”²⁰ Highlighted in this quote is the idea of a psychological necessity for a person—in the first case, for a girl—to shape her identity through her language choices; thus, by using a (now outdated) word such as swinger, she is able to conceive of herself as
something other than promiscuous. Promiscuity, of course, is a highly political, value-laden, and ultimately sexist concept—ideas that likely motivate the use of euphemisms in lieu of *promiscuous* in popular culture. Promiscuity can be defined in many different ways, but for the purposes of this section my definition centers on casual sex and female sexual liberation.

Theologian John Elliott, in his discussion of biblical euphemisms, wrote: “Euphemisms also serve as markers of social identity (specific social and cultural sensibilities, values, norms) and demarcations of in-group from out-groups.” While language can, of course, be very revealing about our education, class, and ethnicity, as related to a discussion of sex, it can also be demonstrative of how a sexual identity can be shaped and understood. In the aforementioned *Time* article, a woman having a lot of sex was demonized; hence the application of the word *promiscuous*. Allan and Burridge, for example, noted that there are more than 2,000 euphemisms for “wanton woman.”

In song, euphemisms for the wanton woman in lieu of *promiscuous* abound.

Ani DiFranco has a song called “Promiscuity” (2012) that explicitly uses the word to celebrate a sexually liberal lifestyle, asking how one would know one’s sexual preferences “til’ you been around the block / a few times on that bike.” While DiFranco proposes that promiscuity can be positive and advantageous, of specific note, the lyrics present the singer’s identity as one associated with sexual liberation: DiFranco is embracing the word and using it to proclaim that sex is an important part of her identity—that she wants to project an identity associated with sexual emancipation and feminism. Unlike DiFranco’s song, however, most other song’s lyrics eschew use of *promiscuity*—perhaps due to its formality, multiple syllables and judgmental connotations—but convey the same idea through euphemism.

Bessie Smith’s “Empty Bed Blues” (1928) is an early example of the use of euphemism to describe sex and the longing for it. Smith recounts her sexual experiences with terms such as “coffee grinder” and “deep sea diver” and muses on her yearnings: “My springs are getting rusty, sleeping single like I do.” The same idea was presented in her “I Want a Little Sugar in My Bowl” (1931): “I need a little hot dog, on my roll / I could stand some lovin’, oh so bad.” A much more recent example using the same techniques is The Veronicas’ song “Untouched” (2007) (“I feel so untouched / And I want you so much”). Euphemisms such as *empty bed, rusty springs, stand some lovin’* and *untouched* are much more genteeel than *promiscuous or horny*; instead of prompting judgment, these songs offer metaphors that are open to interpretation. The subjective nature of these lyrics facilitates a kind of *hedging*; while an audience can infer that sex is being described, the explicit meaning is concealed. This idea was discussed in linguist Paul Baker’s
research on euphemisms and homosexuality: “The use of the ‘double meaning,’ or saying one thing that can be interpreted in two ways, usually one innocent and one subversive, is a way of being controversial and funny at the same time, obviating the potential amount of offense caused and obscuring the meaning from those too young or innocent to understand.”

Like the Smith songs, Donna Summer’s “Hot Stuff” (1979) was about a horny woman phoning various men to coerce one to visit: “gotta have some hot stuff / gotta have some lovin’ tonight.” Like Smith, rather than dubbing herself promiscuous, Summer sings about “waitin’ for some lover to call”; she is painting the picture of a sexually liberated woman without using inflammatory language. As often repeated in discussions of gender and sexuality, a woman who has many sexual partners is called a slut; conversely, highlighting the well-established double standard, a man who does the same is called a stud. For Smith and Summer—particularly considering the periods in which they were singing—through euphemism, they were able to discuss sexual appetite while simultaneously eschewing judgment.

Some far more explicit examples of euphemisms for promiscuous occur in Khia’s song “My Neck, My Back (Lick It)” (2002) (“my neck, my back / lick my Pussy and my crack”) and Peaches’ “Fuck the Pain Away” (2000). In these two examples, the euphemisms are actually more explicit than the clinical terms. In the Smith, Summer and The Veronicas examples, casual sex was romanticized and euphemisms were used for modulation; for Khia and Peaches, the euphemisms are less about presenting oneself as demure, but rather are used to shock and to project a sexually aggressive identity. As mentioned earlier, Elliott noted that euphemisms can be used as “markers of social identity (specific social and cultural sensibilities, values, norms).” Khia and Peaches rely on their language choices to help establish their public identities—to manage the impressions they convey—as sexually liberated. Just as performers such as Courtney Love and Pink have used The Finger to portray themselves as edgy, the deliberate use of controversial language can function similarly. Interestingly, the Khia and Peaches examples illustrate another rationale for sex-themed euphemisms: to be offensive. Whereas euphemisms are often assumed to sugar-coat to avoid offense, as these examples highlight, sometimes a more explicit, dirtier euphemism is chosen to shock, to outrage, and to solidify a nonconservative audience.

THE INTENTION OF OFFENSE

As discussed in the context of the Khia and Peaches lyrics, sometimes euphemisms eschew the assumed sugar-coating intentions and instead are
deployed to be offensive. In this section I examine the abundance of euphemisms for *homosexual* to illustrate this point. While in popular parlance *homosexual* is often substituted by *gay* or *queer*, such euphemisms hold very similar connotations, just with fewer syllables. On screen, however, euphemisms with much more baggage and vitriol attached are frequently deployed. In the film *Clueless* (1995), for example, Murray (Donald Faison) tried to convince his friend Cher (Alicia Silverstone) that her boyfriend was gay:

Your man Christian is a cakeboy! He’s a disco-dancing, Oscar Wilde-reading, Streisand ticket-holding friend of Dorothy. Know what I’m saying?

In *Philadelphia* (1993), during a courtroom scene, the lawyer, Joe Miller (Denzel Washington), asked his client whether he was homosexual:


In an episode of the British television series *Life on Mars* (2006–2007), Gene (Philip Glenister) discussed the suspected homosexuality of another character with his colleague Sam (John Simm):


**Sam:** He’s gay?

In the British series *Queer as Folk* (1999–2000), Stuart (Aidan Gillen) came out to his family using a thorough *barrage* of euphemisms:

Because I’m queer. I’m gay. I’m homosexual. I’m a poof. I’m a poofier, I’m a ponce. I’m a bumboy, baddieboy, backside artist, bugger. I’m bent. I am that arsebandit. I lift those shirts. I’m a faggot-ass, fudge-packing, shit-stabbing uphill gardener. I dine at the downstairs restaurant, I dance at the other end of the ballroom. I’m Moses and the parting of the red cheeks. I fuck and I am fucked. I suck and I am sucked. I rim them and wank them, and every single man’s had the fucking time of his life. And I am *not* a pervert.

Just as in real-life dialogue, the euphemisms in these examples are deployed for a variety of reasons. Homosexuals themselves, in fact, have a history of using euphemisms to speak in code so as to avoid outing themselves. 25 as well
as to be ironic and humorous. While Stuart in *Queer as Folk* invariably found some of the euphemisms he listed to be offensive, he may have been more comfortable with others; some words, in fact, are likely to be used frequently and even favorably in certain contexts. For heterosexual characters such as Murray, Joe, and Gene to use these euphemisms, however, while irony and humor might be rationales, it is much more likely that they were intending to *insult*; their goal was to *malign* homosexuality. Had Gene simply wanted to state that Stephen Warren (Tom Mannion) was homosexual, he could have done so in one single word. Had Murray wanted to refer to Cher’s boyfriend as gay, he, too, could have used the word. If Joe was trying to avoid controversy, he could have stopped after he asked whether his client were gay. Instead, these characters used a broad range of euphemisms—most of which have a history of serving as slurs—thereby highlighting that homosexuality is still a characteristic that has varying degrees of public loathing associated. Otherting is about making a person—or a group of people—feel different from the majority. By using vivid language that focuses on the often stigmatized sexual practices of a minority, the *homosexual* gets portrayed as more heinous and sexual preference becomes a defining and limiting attribute, in turn demonizing homosexuality.

In Stuart’s *Queer as Folk* monologue, he used a number of different euphemisms for homosexuality. While, as noted, he might consider many of these terms to be offensive, there is also the possibility of considering some to be sexy, or at least sexy when deployed during intimacy or heated passion. This possibility is discussed in the next section.

**THE LANGUAGE OF AROUSAL**

Euphemism is frequently thought of as a technique used to temper a sensitive subject matter; euphemisms tend to be words that are less inflammatory and, therefore, less likely to evoke extreme reactions. This, however, is not always the case: the lyrics of Khia and Peaches discussed earlier highlight that sometimes euphemisms are chosen specifically because of their dirty talk connotations.

In my book *Part-Time Perverts: Sex, Pop Culture, and Kink Management*, I extensively discussed dirty talk, noting that such dialogue “can be instrumental in perverse sex”:

> “Inherent in the concept of dirty talk is that the language used differs markedly from the dialogue of daily life; it is sexy because people do not usually speak this way.”

While *penis* might be the clinical term, it is less sexy, and certainly less kinky than a word like *cock*. In *Bachelorette* (2012), for example, when
Trevor (James Marsden) said, “Shut up, Cunt,” to Regan (Kirsten Dunst) during a passionate sex scene, the word *cunt* did not appear to be an accidental choice. If the speaker intends to arouse a lover or themself, clinical terms have much less passion and urgency attached than euphemism. This is a point sex writer Tracy Quan made in her chapter on prostitution and euphemism: “‘Whore’ is an angry insult during a marital row or, in bed, a spicy term evoking erotic abandon . . . Try to imagine a passionate lover replacing ‘whore’ with ‘sex worker’ during an exchange of erotic sweet-nothings.”

Jay similarly discussed this issue by noting that “[e]rotic words are certainly not the same as clinical or technical terms. The erotic relies on slang and euphemism.” In a sex scene from *Sideways* (2004), the following dirty talk transpired in a sex scene between Cammi (Missy Doty) and her husband (MC Gainey):

**Husband:** You picked him up and you fucked him, didn’t you, bitch?

**Cammi:** I picked him up and I fucked him. I’m a bad girl.

**Husband:** And you liked fucking him, didn’t you, you fat little whore?

**Cammi:** I liked it when you caught me fucking him.

While a word like *whore* is sexy because it is less polite and *dirtier* than an established word like *prostitute*, part of the thrill—part of the titillation—comes from using language that would be unacceptable in any other context, and notably one that is inextricably bound up with power. *Whore* is sexy because it conjures the extreme emotions that more clinical terms are unable, something I discussed in *Part-Time Perverts*: “Dirty talk can help create power dynamics which otherwise do not exist in a relationship and which facilitate both power loss or gain that differ (often quite markedly) from what is experienced in real life.”

Words such as *cunt* and *whore* are effective in dirty talk because they have political gravitas: they are insulting, subordinating, and inflammatory, but notably they are *evocative*. Such words can be arousing because they are distanced from the language of real life and simultaneously fetishize subordination.

While dirty talk frequently eroticizes and fetishizes the politics of euphemism, *diluting* politics can also be a central rationale for euphemism, as discussed in the next section.

**CORRECTING THE POLITICS**

Art critic Robert Hughes condemned politically correct language, facetiously describing it as “a linguistic Lourdes where evil and misfortune are
dispelled by a dip in the waters of euphemism.” His words constitute a theatrical description but nonetheless provide a useful allusion to a central rationale for euphemism: political correctness. Political correctness describes the process whereby efforts are made to phrase things without exhibiting bias or judgment; differently abled, vertically challenged, and plus-size are examples. While class, race, religion, and physicality are a few of the many realms where political correctness has influenced language, sexuality is one area where the impact is both rife and extensively discussed. In The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism, for example, it was contended that political correctness was born from American feminism in the 1980s and constitutes “a serious attempt to challenge habitual assumptions encoded in speech and tradition.” While political correctness is highly contentious—some feminists describe it as puritanical and a straitjacket, while others praise it as liberating—its influence on popular parlance is undeniable. In this section I examine the political correctness surrounding prostitution.

One of the central aims of political correctness is to avoid terms that reinforce prejudice. In recent years the phrase sex work has come to be extended to all people who work in the sex industry, most notably prostitutes. Sex work, while a popular euphemism—as Quan notes, in some circles, the phrase is mandatory and prostitution is frowned upon—it is not without contention. In his work on prostitution and policy, criminologist Roger Matthews outlined some of the consequences of using the word: “The adoption of terms like ‘sex work’ is in fact a mode of distancing, sanitizing and rationalizing prostitution.” Matthews discussed that its use removes stigma and is less essentialist. Quan similarly noted that sex work is “associated with acceptance of the prostitute and prostitute power.” While there are benefits, theorists also spotlight a number of problems. Matthews, for example, noted that sex work muddies the waters, making it difficult to distinguish between prostitutes and other kinds of sex industry workers. Quan similarly noted that sex work “ignores or undercuts the emotions that surround prostitution—and prostitutes.” Just as political correctness may be construed as a kind of linguistic whitewash, the use of euphemisms for prostitution conceal the politics surrounding sex work, thereby rendering euphemism use controversial. They may be controversial in this context perhaps, but such euphemisms are identifiable throughout popular culture.

Prostitutes is named explicitly in a number of songs: Frank Zappa had a song “Teen-Age Prostitutes” (1982), Tom Waits had “I’m Your Late Night Evening Prostitute” (1991), and Guns ‘n’ Roses had “Prostitute” (2008). Far more common, however, is the cavalcade of euphemisms used in place of this term.
Hooker and bo are common substitutions and are apparent in a wide variety of songs, from Waits’s “Christmas Card from a Hooker in Minneapolis” (1978), to Randy Travis’s “Three Wooden Crosses” (2002) (“A farmer and a teacher, a hooker and a preacher / Ridin’ on a midnight bus bound for Mexico”), to Ludacris’s “Ho” (2000) (“You doin’ ho activities with ho tendencies / Hoes are your friends, hoes are your enemies”). Streetwalker, also common in popular parlance, appears in Ryan Adams’s “Tina Toledos Street Walkin’ Blues” (2001) (“Hard on the knees, money in the bag”), Delta Spirit’s “Streetwalker” (2008) (“Old men like to rape her in the red light”), and Time Again’s “Streetwalker” (2006) (“now she’s on the corner twenty dollars at a time”). Simon and Garfunkel used the popular whores euphemism in “The Boxer” (1969), where the protagonist “took some comfort there.” Hall and Oates used the same word in “I’m Watching You (A Mutant Romance)” (1974) (“I can usually find you near 42nd and 8th / A whore in a doorway (yeah)”), and Kid Rock used it in “Desperate-Rado” (1993) (“and I’d kill for a cheap whore and a barrel of cold beer”).

Words such as hooker, streetwalker, and whore—while predictable—are less about being politically correct and, in fact, function more as synonyms. Music, however, also offers a variety of other euphemisms whereby the intention centers on eschewing judgment, in line with the objective of political correctness.

Cole Porter’s “Love for Sale” (1930) is a prostitute’s tout to customers: “appetizing young love for sale / love that’s fresh and still unspooled / love that’s only slightly soiled.” “Love for sale” is similarly offered in Donna Summer’s “Lady of the Night” (1974). In Janis Ian’s “Pro-Girl” (1967), she describes the work of a prostitute: “you work your way on through the streets of hell.” This popular streets metonym is evident in Arctic Monkeys’ “When the Sun Goes Down” (2006), where a woman is said to have “had to roam the streets.” Painted lady substitutes for prostitute in Elton John’s “Sweet Painted Lady” (1973); in John’s 1975 “Island Girl,” he refers to prostitution as “turning tricks.” The hustle is sung about in Lou Reed’s “Walk on the Wild Side” (1972), where listeners are told “Ev’rybody had to pay and pay / A hustle here and a hustle there.” The Police’s “Roxanne” (1978) again eschewed prostitution and instead offered lyrics such as “You don’t have to sell your body to the night” and “You don’t have to wear that dress tonight.” Prostitutes are referred to as bad girls in Summer’s song of the same name (1979). In Iron Maiden’s “22 Acacia Avenue” (1982), the “looking for a good time” euphemism is used. In ZZ Top’s “Mexican Blackbird” (1987), a prostitute is referred to as a “honey”: “dancin’ and
a-lovin’s her trade.” In Snoop Dogg’s “Pay for Pussy” (1998), prostitution is referred to as “the world’s oldest profession.” In Salt ‘n’ Pepa’s “None of Your Business” (1993), it is spoken of with the euphemism “sell it on the weekend.” Cage the Elephant’s “Ain’t No Rest for the Wicked” (2008) refers to prostitution as “use a little company.”

Euphemisms such as honey and painted lady are much gentler—and certainly less politically loaded—than prostitute. Similarly, such examples frequently dodge politics by focusing on the work of the prostitute; love for sale, bustling, selling it. By focusing on the work, the euphemism can be construed as less of an indictment of the woman and more a description of her labor, functioning the way euphemisms are assumed to in an attempt to neutralize politics and downplay sting. Similarly, in songs that explore a man’s use of a prostitute, such euphemisms can moderate his purchase of sex; by eschewing explicit and loaded words such as prostitute and whore, the transaction can, in some way, be romanticized.

In the next section the idea of euphemisms deployed for entertainment purposes is explored.

EUPHEMISM AND LAUGHTER

As highlighted by many of the euphemisms discussed thus far, while achieving a variety of purposes including arousal and sugar-coating, euphemisms can also entertain. In fact, a euphemism is often chosen because it is simply funnier than the more clinical term. As linguist Barry Blake notes, while terms such as special for those at the lower end of the ability spectrum and vertically challenged for short are motivated by political correctness, such terms are also frequently used jokingly. In an episode of How I Met Your Mother (2005–), for example, Barney (Neil Patrick Harris) termed a vibrator “a battery-powered adult recreational fake penis.” The elaborate euphemism is funnier as opposed to being more politically correct or less offensive. In the British sitcom Are You Being Served? (1972–1985), a constant stream of jokes were centered on Mrs. Slocombe’s (Mollie Sugden) persistent reference to her pussy:

Mrs. Slocombe: (Removes her gas mask) What about this fog? My pussy’s been gasping all night.

Mrs. Slocombe: It’s a wonder I’m here at all, you know. My pussy got soaking wet. I had to dry it out in front of the fire before I left.

Mrs. Slocombe: You’re lucky to have me at all, Captain Peacock. I had to thaw my pussy out before I came. It had been out all night.
While *pussy* as a euphemism for *vagina* is very common in popular parlance, Mrs. Slocombe was actually talking about her pet cat. In this context, the use of *pussy* worked as a double entendre rather than as a euphemism: *pussy* simply made every cat comment appear salacious, thereby soliciting laughter. There are many other examples where euphemisms for genitals are specifically used for comedy. On the website TVTropes.com, the phrase “Hurricane of Euphemisms” describes the tactic used in film and television whereby a barrage of euphemisms is used for effect. Earlier in this chapter I discussed examples from *Clueless*, *Philadelphia*, *Life on Mars*, and *Queer as Folk* to illustrate some more serious applications of stacked euphemisms as related to homosexuality. In this section I examine the hurricane of euphemisms used in comedy as related to genitals.

In the film *Teen Witch* (1989), a hurricane of euphemisms was used when a sex education teacher asked her students to guess what an umbrella will represent in her demonstration. One student, Rhet (Noah Blake), raised his hand and answered, “A roger. A love one. Joystick, dong, zipper-lizard, tallywhacker, trouser-snake, schlong!” The hurricane of euphemisms for *penis* was taken substantially further in the film *Four Rooms* (1995) during a heated discussion between Sigfried (David Proval) and his wife Angela (Jennifer Beals), who had been trying to enrage Sigfried by talking about the penis of the bellhop (Tim Roth):

**Sigfried:** Please stop talking about his cock!

**Angela:** Well, it’s hard to stop talking about something that’s so huge. I mean, I could go on and on about his cock… his bone… his knob… bishop, wang, thang, rod, hot rod; hump-mobile, Oscar, dong, dagger, banana, cucumber, salami, sausage, kielbasa, schlong, dink, tool, Big Ben, Mr. Happy, pet, pecker, pee-pee, wee-wee, wiener, pisser, pistol, joint, hose, horn, middle leg, third leg, meat, stick, joystick, dipstick, one-eyed wonder, Junior, little head, little guy, Rample Foreskin, Tootsie Roll, love muscle, skin flute, Roto-Rooter, snake… Hammer, rammer, spammer, bazooka, rubber, chubby, sticky, stubby.

Angela’s intent in this scene appeared neither to sugar-coat nor to offend. Instead, the stacked euphemisms were simply used for comedy: the sheer number of different euphemisms for *penis* was farcical and entertaining. This idea was also presented in Monty Python’s *The Meaning of Life* (1983) when Eric Idle (playing Noël Coward) sang “*The Penis Song,*” whose lyrics included “Your piece of pork, your wife’s best friend, your percy or your cock.” Lady Gaga’s song “*LoveGame*” (2008) uses the equally humorous euphemism of *disco stick.*
In a hurricane of euphemisms scene from *Varsity Blues* (1999), euphemisms for erections were proposed: Miss Davis (Tonie Perensky) asked her class if anyone could suggest some “common slang” for the male erection. Jonathan (James Van Der Beek) offered the following answer:

Pitchin’ a tent, sportin’ a wood, stiffie, flesh rocket, tall tommy, Mr. Morbis, the march is on, icicle has formed, Jack’s magic beanstalk, rigor mortis has set in, Mr. Mushroom-head, mushroom on a stick, purple headed yogurt slinger . . . Oh, and Pedro.

In the episode of *House* referred to earlier, a hurricane of euphemisms was used in the context of masturbation when Dr. House explained to Claire (Leigh-Allyn Baker) that her young daughter Rose (Amber DeMarco) had been masturbating:

**House:** In actuality, all your little girl is doing is saying “yoo hoo” to the hoo hoo.

**Claire:** She’s what?

**House:** Marching the penguin. Ya-ya-ing the sisterhood. Finding Nemo.

**Rose:** That was funny.

**House:** It’s called gratification disorder. Sort of a misnomer. If one was unable to gratify oneself, that would be a disorder.

**Claire:** (Covering the girl’s ears) Are you saying she’s masturbating?

**House:** I was trying to be discreet. There’s a child in the room!

Masturbation was treated similarly in an episode of *Game of Thrones* (2011–) when Tyrion (Peter Dinklage) confessed to masturbation in his childhood: “I milked my eel, I flogged the one-eyed snake, I skinned my sausage, I made the bald man cry.” In *Liar Liar* (1997), this hurricane technique was used to describe sex in a courtroom scene when lawyer Fletcher (Jim Carrey) asked about the sex life of a witness: “You slammed her, you dunked her donut, you gave her dog a Snausage! You stuffed her like a Thanksgiving turkey!”

While these examples give insight into the enormous variety of sex-themed euphemisms, in each case their deployment was primarily geared toward soliciting laughter; audiences are often entertained by linguistic gymnastics. The use of euphemisms in these examples is funny because euphemisms are stacked for comic effect; humor is borne from exaggeration and madcap pery. Such examples are also entertaining because many of these descriptions are visually arresting and substantially more entertaining than use of the more clinical descriptors.
FEARING THE EUPHEMISM

While this chapter has focused on reviewing and explaining the wide variety of euphemisms connected to sex, worth pondering is whether we should be concerned by their use. Earlier, for example, I discussed Orwell’s use of the expression “newspeak” in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where the aim was for the state to limit expression. In Orwell’s novel, the Newspeak dictionary editor explained: “Don’t you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it.”

Given the dozens of euphemisms discussed throughout this chapter, it seems thoroughly *incongruous* that a narrowing of language might be occurring: if there are hundreds and thousands of euphemisms for sex and wanton woman, for example, surely the lexicon isn’t actually shrinking. While a narrowing may not be occurring, the use of euphemisms does raise some concerns, particularly when connected to crime. In Parker and Mahlstedt’s work on language and rape, the authors posed the question: “Imagine a time when the terms ‘date rape’ and ‘acquaintance rape’ did not exist. What would you have called the experience of being raped by someone you were dating or knew as a friend?” Following this theme, in historian Anthony Neal’s book *Unburdened by Conscience*, he recounted an interesting story: “A revered historian of American slavery once asked me, ‘Do we need to be told again that white men took sexual advantage of black women during American slavery?’ I replied, ‘Not exactly.’ Depending upon how we interpret the phrase ‘took sexual advantage of,’ it could mean anything from a euphemism for rape to a misleading mischaracterization of it.” These examples highlight a problem that occurs in the absence of accurate and precise language: a minefield of ambiguity is created. While there are often serious reasons why someone might choose to eschew *rape* and use a euphemism instead, doing so has consequence: a central one is that meaning often gets muddled. Connected to this idea is that not only do euphemisms confuse events, but they also potentially confuse thinking. Carolyn Logan, in her book *Counterbalance: Gendered Perspectives for Writing and Language*, discussed this idea, contending that euphemisms confuse thinking and potentially *values*: “euphemisms are sometimes handy, but, if the habitual use of euphemisms causes us to forget that stealing is wrong or to ignore death as a part of life, the habit inhibits clear thinking and clear communications.” Logan’s fear is that by making language gray, the concepts of right and wrong likewise become blurred. Discussed earlier were the examples of the songs “Runaway Love” and “Delilah,” where rape is discussed with a
variety of very watered-down euphemisms. A possible consequence is that instead of being explicit about the perpetrator being a rapist and the crime being heinous, the recounting of the story becomes modulated, gray, and confusing.

Not only does using a euphemism in the context of rape confuse thoughts and descriptions, but it helps reinforce the idea that frank discussion of rape is taboo. In his research, Jay contended that “[w]hen speakers refrain from talking about the taboo, they empower the taboo.” Continuing to use euphemisms instead of the more precise, clinical descriptions supports the idea that some words are too bad, too inflammatory, and too emotive to say aloud. When taboo exists around certain words, people may be afraid to say them, and thus be afraid to speak up about crimes or ask questions related to their bodies.

Instead of being explicit in dialogue about sex, humans often favor euphemisms. Such euphemisms are detectable throughout popular culture, notably in songs and on the screen. In this chapter I reviewed a wide variety of euphemisms, identifying that our reasons for their deployment are just as diverse as the many options at our disposal.