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ARTICLE

It Goes Without Saying: The Language We Use and Avoid

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Abstract

This article examines how everyday language deals with topics that feel difficult to name directly, especially those related to death, sex, the body, and desire. It shows how euphemism and metaphor are not simply decorative figures of speech, but central tools societies use to manage what feels uncomfortable or unspeakable. By combining familiar examples with a brief historical perspective, the piece illustrates how both words and silences reveal values, fears, and assumptions a culture might have. The article introduces key ideas from the humanities in an accessible way, inviting young readers to reflect on the language they use and hear every day, and to consider how those linguistic choices shape the way people imagine the world and relate to one another.

Keywords: discourse analysis; medieval studies; sexuality; taboo language

I'm on the bus near a group of young people. I hear one say, "That's a red flag." The others nod. A second adds, "Thank God you didn't sleep with him." As they keep talking—"seeing someone," "hooking up"—each phrase carries a world of meaning.

A child wouldn't understand any of this. *Red flag* sounds like a warning sign on the road. *Sleeping with someone* doesn't involve sleeping. At some point, we learn expressions like these. We discover what they hide and what they allow us to say. Once we do, they start to feel natural. Even obvious. But why do we talk this way?

1. Speaking indirectly

Not all of these phrases exist for the same reason. Understanding what a *red flag* means can show that we belong in the conversation. At other times, the answer lies in taboos, which exist across societies.[1] Some parts of life feel too personal, frightening, or embarrassing. Death is one of them. Sex is another. So are the body and certain kinds of desire. They are all part of human life. Yet we often struggle to speak about them directly. Some words simply feel too heavy. So we try to avoid them.

[1] On taboo and its relationship to language, see Allan and Burridge 2006.

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One common strategy is the euphemism. It replaces words that sound too harsh or uncomfortable: a linguistic cushion. Instead of saying someone *died*, we say they *passed away*. We *put a pet to sleep* or refer to a dead body as *the remains.* In other contexts, people talk about *losses* rather than naming death directly.

The same pattern appears elsewhere: people speak about *going to the bathroom* instead of naming what they actually do there. Everyone understands what it means, and everyone is happy to leave it at that. We do something similar when talking about our bodies. We have no problem talking about an arm or a leg. But when it comes to certain body parts, the language changes. People speak of *genitals* and *private parts* depending on the context. Informally, people use playful nicknames. Some of them can be surprisingly creative—often more creative than necessary. Linguists Keith Allan and Kate Burridge even speak of "the amazing poetic inventiveness of ordinary people."[2] The basic idea doesn't change. The feeling does. The indirect version sounds lighter and easier to say out loud.

The words we choose may depend on who we are talking to. But some indirect expressions are so common that we hardly notice them. At the beginning of a relationship, we may say we are *seeing someone*, *going out*, or simply *talking.* We see, go out, and talk with many people, but in a romantic context these phrases take on a different meaning.

2. Words that help

Some ways of talking are not only softer. They are also more imaginative. When we say someone *broke our heart*, we do not mean that our heart was physically damaged. Hearts do not shatter like glass. Yet the image makes sense. It turns an emotional experience into physical pain. It helps us describe how hurt we feel. This is what a metaphor does: it lets us understand one experience through another.

In the 1980s, linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson called metaphor "one of our most important tools for trying to comprehend partially what cannot be comprehended totally."[3] We often use the language of battle to talk about love. A relationship in trouble can become something to *fight for*, as Lady Gaga and Bruno Mars sing about in "Die with a Smile": "Our love's the only war worth fighting for."[4] Love becomes something that can be defended, won, or lost. Other expressions turn relationships into journeys. A relationship can *come a long way* or *go nowhere* without anyone taking a single step. These metaphors give shape to something difficult to explain. They turn the changes and struggles of love into things we can picture.

Metaphors also shape how we talk about intimacy. Someone can *make a move*, reach *first* or *second base*, and even *score.* And when it's somebody's turn to act, we say *the ball is in their court.* What sport are we playing here? Dating, apparently. These metaphors turn intimacy into a game of moves, stages, and goals, while avoiding direct reference to what actually happens.

The impulse to speak indirectly is not new. In earlier societies, certain topics were difficult to name. Some sexual practices and desires could be labelled *unspeakable.* In medieval Latin texts, some sins were called *nefanda*, a word that literally means "things not to be spoken

[2] Allan and Burridge 2006, 2.
[3] Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 194.
[4] Gaga and Mars 2024.

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of."[5] So people wrote about them, most often in discussions of sexual behaviour and other acts considered deeply transgressive. Relations between men, masturbation, sex with animals, and even cannibalism: they were all thought to violate nature, and therefore the order created by God.[6] *Nefanda* both reveals and refuses. Think of *He Who Must Not Be Named* in *Harry Potter*. The name is avoided, but everyone knows who is meant. In both cases, people name something by declaring it unnamable.

That was not the only way around difficult subjects. Medieval lawyers sometimes used *infortunium*, meaning "misfortune" or "accident," to refer to suicide.[7] Indirect language could take other forms too. Florence became so notorious for sex between men that the German word *Florenzer* ("Florentine") could also mean a man who had sex with another man. They even had the verb *florenzen* to refer to the activity.[8] Words and phrases that don't mean anything to you and me could carry considerable weight.

Just like today, language circled around certain experiences instead of confronting them. Medieval writers could label something unspeakable while still making sure their readers knew what was meant. People softened or disguised the most uncomfortable subjects, trusting that others would understand. The words may have been different, but the instinct was the same.

3. Words and silences

Looking closely, we begin to see something larger. The way we speak reveals more than we realise. Take sexual orientation. For young people, terms like *gay* or *lesbian* are part of everyday speech. They describe identities and patterns of attraction. Medieval writers used a different vocabulary.[9] They talked about particular acts rather than sexual orientation. Their words expressed moral and religious judgement. Different vocabularies can help people understand sexualities in very different ways.

The conversation I overheard about *red flags* and *toxic* partners would not have sounded the same twenty years ago. Relationships and emotions were not completely different. The available words were. Each period develops its own vocabulary and silences.

And we are part of that history. Language is something that we inherit, but we also play a role in what happens to it.[10] We do not simply repeat the words handed down to us. Through our choices, however small, we keep expressions alive, change them, or replace them. And we choose both our words and silences. The work-around phrases we use every day can do more than help us communicate. They can also speak volumes about us: our fears, our discomforts, and even our creativity.

[5] On *nefanda* and the language of the unspeakable in medieval literature, see Blud 2017.

[6] On medieval understandings of sexual and other acts considered contrary to nature, see Chiffoleau 1990, 294–95; Maryks 2016, 68–70.

[7] On *infortunium* and other ways of referring to suicide in the Middle Ages, see Murray 1998, 37.

[8] On the association between the city of Florence and sex between men, see Rocke 1996, 3.

[9] On the difficulties of applying modern categories of sexual identity to the Middle Ages, see Karras and Pierpont 2023, 8.

[10] Linguists refer to this role as *speaker agency*. See Smakman 2018, 51, on the role of individual choices in language variation.

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There will always be things difficult to talk about. But that does not mean silence. When direct words feel impossible, imagination steps in, and we take a different path. That instinct has been with us for centuries. The shape we give to language leaves traces of what we struggle with and how we respond to it. Words change, acquire new meanings, or take unexpected forms, but they rarely give up. Perhaps, then, very little goes without saying.

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