
**EUPHEMISTIC LANGUAGE, SOCIAL CONTROL AND
IDENTITY IN DYSTOPIAN DISCOURSE:
*THE HANDMAID’S TALE, NEVER LET ME GO,
AND THE GIVER***

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INTRODUCTION

The question of the role language plays in shaping human thought and structuring worldviews has been a subject of long-standing debate. The idea that the language one speaks determines the way one thinks is commonly associated with the strong (deterministic) version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. As Edward Sapir himself observed, people are “very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society.”¹ This strong version of linguistic relativity has subsequently been developed and debated in linguistic theory and has also been imaginatively explored in contemporary fiction. Ted Chiang’s “Story of Your Life,” for instance, presents an extreme version of linguistic relativity in which acquiring an alien language, non-linear in nature, crucially transforms the protagonist’s perception of time and consciousness.²

The weak (relativist) version of linguistic relativity hypothesis holds that language *influences* rather than *determines* cognition. Thus, Steven Pinker, who describes language as “a window to human nature” that can “give us insight into who we are,”³ nonetheless explicitly rejects strong deterministic interpretations, arguing that language should not be regarded “as an insidious shaper of thought”⁴ – scepticism, pushed even further when he says: “The discussions that assume that language determines thought

¹ Sapir Edward. The collected works of Edward Sapir. 1, General linguistics / edited by Pierre Swiggers. Mouton de Gruyter. Berlin, New York, 2008. P. 209.

² Chiang T. “Story of Your Life”. In Stories of Your Life and Others. London: Picador, 2015. 353 p.

³ Pinker Steven. The stuff of thought: language as a window into human nature. Viking. USA, 2007. P. vii-viii.

⁴ Pinker Steven. The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language. HarperPerennial. HarperCollins Publishers, 1995. P. 19.

carry on only by a collective suspension of disbelief”⁵. At the same time, Pinker acknowledges that “language surely affects thought”⁶, particularly by providing alternative ways of framing the same situation in “different and incompatible ways”⁷ by directing attention towards some aspects of an event and away from others.

Within this framework, euphemisms emerge as a particularly effective linguistic strategy for reframing socially sensitive or disturbing phenomena in ways that reduce emotional impact, normalize problematic practices and, as Pinker observes, “veil” meanings through indirect expression.⁸

Classical euphemism theory (Ayto, 1993; Allan & Burridge, 1991; Bussmann, 2006) focuses primarily on taboo avoidance and politeness. The present study extends this perspective by examining euphemisms in dystopian fiction, where language may function as an instrument of social control and identity regulation, contributing to the representation and normalization of violence and to broader processes of social transformation.

The aim of this study is to examine how euphemistic language, together with institutionally imposed forms of naming, contributes to the representation and normalization of violence and the regulation of individual identity in dystopian discourse. The analysis focuses on Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*⁹, Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*¹⁰, and Lois Lowry’s *The Giver*.¹¹ The study employs an integrated approach combining cognitive linguistics, semantics, pragmatics, and stylistics in order to examine euphemism both as a linguistic form and as a discourse strategy.

The examples are selected through purposive sampling of lexical items that function in the narrative context as indirect signs of violence, death, exploitation, coercion, or loss of personhood. The study does not attempt an exhaustive corpus-based inventory of all potentially euphemistic expressions. Instead, examples are selected according to their relevance to the central research questions and their demonstrable relationship to the institutional discourse of the three fictional societies.

⁵ Ibid., P. 58

⁶ Pinker Steven. *The stuff of thought: language as a window into human nature*. Viking. USA, 2007. P. 125.

⁷ Ibid., P. 4

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Atwood Margaret. *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Farmington Hills, Mich: Thorndike Press, 2017.

¹⁰ Ishiguro Kazuo. *Never Let Me Go*. Faber & Faber Limited, 2010.

¹¹ Lowry Lois. *The Giver*. Houghton Mifflin Company. Boston, 2004.

1. The problem of linguistic manipulation and euphemistic framing in dystopian fiction

Contemporary academic research regards dystopian literature as a powerful medium of social and political critique. By creating oppressive imaginary societies, dystopian writers explore such issues as totalitarianism, surveillance, social inequality, gender control, and the suppression of individual autonomy.

Dystopian literature, by definition, depicts “any alarmingly unpleasant imaginary worlds, usually of the projected future.”¹² Within such fictional worlds, language frequently is shown as an important mechanism of social control, as it may regulate communication, impose ideological interpretations of reality, define social roles, and restrict individual autonomy.

The relationship between language, power, and identity has received considerable attention in recent studies. Massaad (2025), in her research on the sociolinguistics of power and identity in dystopian fiction, argues that “The manipulation of language in dystopian narratives offers a unique lens to examine how authoritarian regimes can shape reality, suppress individual autonomy, and maintain societal dominance.”¹³ She further emphasizes that language functions as an instrument of power capable of exercising control over individuals and consequently reshaping or suppressing their identities.

These functions of language have been examined in recent studies of a range of dystopian works, including George Orwell’s *1984* and *Animal Farm*, Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*, Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Lois Lowry’s *The Giver*, Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*, and works by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. Despite differences between the fictional societies represented in these works, the studies demonstrate a recurring connection between linguistic control, ideological domination, and the regulation of individual identity.

Thus, Murkett, examining *The Handmaid’s Tale*, describes language as “a political weapon, designed to impose ideology; designate roles and entrench hierarchies; provoke mass hysteria; limit communication and freedom of expression, and maintain patriarchal authority.”¹⁴ This formulation is particularly relevant to the present study because it connects linguistic control with the designation of social roles. In Atwood’s fictional world, Gilead, language does not merely reflect an existing hierarchy; it participates in establishing and maintaining the categories through which individuals are socially defined.

¹² Baldick Chris. The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms. Oxford University Press, 2001. P. 74.

¹³ Massaad Madoline. Sociolinguistics of Power and Identity in Dystopian Fiction. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*. 2025. Vol-10. Issue-2. P. 71.

¹⁴ Murkett Kristina. *The Handmaid’s Tale – The Power of Language and The Language Of Power*. *English & Media Centre*. P. 1.

A similar relationship between language and ideological control is identified by Khattak, Sari and Talha (2025) in their Critical Discourse Analysis of *Never Let Me Go*. The authors argue that institutional discourse is used to normalize “the exploitation and [it] suppresses resistance by presenting obedience, creativity and emotional restraint as virtues.”¹⁵ They demonstrate that institutional discourse reproduces “the interests of dominant groups” through a “narrative of care, duty and inevitability,” presenting ideological constructs as natural.¹⁶ Such discourse contributes to the internalization of “exploitation, reinforcing the hegemonic structures that govern them.”¹⁷

This observation is important because it demonstrates that linguistic control does not necessarily depend on explicit commands or direct coercion. It may operate through the creation of a vocabulary in which particular social practices are represented as natural, necessary, desirable, or inevitable. When obedience is represented as a virtue and exploitation through a “narrative of care, duty and inevitability,” the linguistic system contributes to making the existing social order appear legitimate.

The same principle can be observed in Lowry’s novel *The Giver*. Pradivlianna and Gladio (2025) argue that the controlled linguistic environment of Lowry’s community limits the characters’ capacity to perceive and articulate certain aspects of their lives. At the same time, the protagonist’s “newly-acquired ability to perceive language and to express himself in a more complex and linguistically diverse way” allows him to recognize the limitations of his community and ultimately contributes to his protest against it.¹⁸ Language therefore performs a dual function: it can restrict perception and identity, but it can also become a condition for resistance.

This duality is also emphasized by Massaad, who argues that language in dystopian fiction is not exclusively a mechanism of domination but also functions as “a means of challenging oppression.”¹⁹ In her analysis of Orwell, Bradbury and Atwood, she demonstrates that “despite linguistic control, language serves as a tool for resistance.”²⁰ Murkett similarly argues that in *The*

¹⁵ Khattak Junaid Ahmed, Adelina Yunita Sari, Idrees Talha. Ideological Control and Power Dynamics in Kazuo Ishiguro’s “Never Let Me Go”: A Critical Discourse Analysis through a Marxist Lens. *Journal of Applied Linguistics*. 2025. Vol. 5 No. 1. P. 51.

¹⁶ Ibid., P. 49.

¹⁷ Ibid., P. 43.

¹⁸ Pradivlianna L.M., Gladio S.V. Language of Control in Lois Lowry’s Novel *The Giver*. *Нова філологія*. 2025. N. 100. P. 177.

¹⁹ Massaad Madoline. Sociolinguistics of Power and Identity in Dystopian Fiction. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*. 2025. Vol-10. Issue-2. P. 71.

²⁰ Ibid., P. 78.

Handmaid's Tale language offers “a route out of passive acceptance.”²¹ Through writing and reconstructing her memories, the main character, a woman named Offred, can “stop herself from being totally overwhelmed by this totalitarian system, and hold onto some semblance of freedom. For freedom of expression is exactly that: freedom.”²²

Thus, recent publications present language in dystopian fiction as operating between two interconnected possibilities: it can function as a mechanism of control and identity suppression, but it can also provide a means of recognizing and challenging oppressive structures. Acts of writing, storytelling, remembering, and linguistic awakening may enable characters “to preserve their identities and challenge the state’s authority.”²³

However, most of the studies reviewed above focus primarily on large-scale mechanisms of linguistic control: restricted vocabulary, censorship, controlled naming, institutional discourse, ideological narratives, and limitations on access to knowledge. Comparatively less attention has been paid to the specific linguistic strategies through which individual practices of violence, exploitation, and coercion are represented. This creates a basis for examining such (initially) linguistic phenomenon as euphemization as a more specific mechanism operating within broader systems of linguistic control.

Euphemism has traditionally been associated with the avoidance of taboo, offence, or social disapproval. Originally, the word *euphemism* originates from Greek *euphēmía* (‘use of words of good omen’) and typically means “a polite, indirect expression instead of a direct, offensive one”²⁴ or “a pleasant replacement for an objectionable word that has pejorative connotations.”²⁵

Expanding this term further, Ayto (1993) defines euphemisms as “the set of communicative strategies we have evolved to refer to a topic under a taboo, without actually contravening its terms”²⁶ and describes them more broadly as “avoidance language and evasive expression” functioning as a “protective shield” against social disapproval.²⁷ Such definitions emphasize the indirect nature of euphemistic expression and its role in managing potentially problematic topics.

At the same time, euphemistic force cannot be determined exclusively

²¹ Murkett Kristina. *The Handmaid's Tale – The Power of Language and The Language Of Power. English & Media Centre*. P. 1.

²² *Ibid.*, P. 5.

²³ Massaad Madoline. Sociolinguistics of Power and Identity in Dystopian Fiction. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*. 2025. Vol-10. Issue-2. P. 77.

²⁴ Brown E. K. *The Cambridge Dictionary of Linguistics*. Cambridge University Press, 2013. P. 158.

²⁵ Bussmann Hadumod. *Routledge Dictionary of language and linguistics*. Routledge. London. New York, 2006. P. 338.

²⁶ Ayto John. *Euphemisms. Over 3,000 ways to avoid being rude or giving offence*. Bloomsbury, London, 1993. P. 1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, P. 3.

by the lexical form of an expression. As Allan and Burridge (1991) argue, “euphemism and dysphemism are principally determined by the choice of expression within a given context.”²⁸ This contextual dimension is particularly important for literary analysis, since an expression may function neutrally in ordinary usage but acquire euphemistic force within a particular fictional social and ideological environment.

These ideas are further developed in Crespo-Fernández’s works, whose approach is particularly relevant to the present study. He argues that euphemism should not be reduced to a simple lexical substitution: “to reduce the euphemistic process to a one-for-one lexical substitution would be to lose sight of the discursive euphemistic manoeuvres that take place in political communication.”²⁹ Euphemism should therefore be considered both as a semantic-lexical phenomenon and as a communicative strategy through which speakers attempt to achieve particular effects.

This distinction allows euphemism to be connected with the broader problem of ideological discourse. Crespo-Fernández (2018) identifies euphemism as a *discursive strategy* that may serve not only face-saving and politeness purposes but also the concealment of unsettling or controversial aspects of reality. Chovanec (2019) summarizes this position by distinguishing between euphemistic uses aimed at protecting the interlocutor and “underhand euphemisms” that may “mystify and misrepresent” real life. Such euphemisms can “project a self-interested version of reality.”³⁰

This distinction is especially relevant to dystopian fiction. In an oppressive fictional society, euphemistic language may serve institutional interests by replacing direct representations of violence or exploitation with expressions that are more socially acceptable. The function of such language is therefore not necessarily to conceal the referent completely. Rather, it may modify the way the referent is evaluated by foregrounding less threatening or more desirable aspects of the event.

Chovanec (2019) develops this argument through the concept of *cognitive distancing*. He argues that euphemism increases “the symbolic distance between the phenomenon referred to and its concrete verbalization by the speaker” and characterizes euphemism as “a form of cognitive distancing.”³¹ The euphemistic expression consequently establishes a greater distance between the recipient and the unpleasant reality being represented.

²⁸ Allan Keith, Burridge Kate. Euphemism and dysphemism: language used as shield and weapon. Oxford University Press, 1991. P. 4.

²⁹ Crespo-Fernández, Eliecer. Euphemisms and political discourse in the British regional press. *Brno Studies in English*. 2014. N. 40. P. 8.

³⁰ Chovanec Jan. Euphemisms and non-proximal manipulation of discourse space: The case of blue-on-blue. *Lingua*. 2019. Vol. 225. P 52.

³¹ Ibid.

It should be probably mentioned here that similar research in psychology was conducted by Stanley and Neck. They examined euphemisms as a powerful linguistic framing device and studied how their influence on moral judgments and punitive responses to such transgressions as bribery, fraud, etc. After conducting experiments, they found evidence that euphemistic labels significantly reduce both perceptions of wrongdoings and the motivation to punish for them. Interestingly, even the reconstruction of euphemistic structures into the non-euphemistic ones, didn't help to completely erase the effect on participants' judgement, thus underscoring "the power of simple linguistic manipulations in influencing public opinion."³²

These studies provide a useful theoretical basis for understanding euphemism as a mechanism of linguistic control and discursive strategy. If an undesirable practice is repeatedly represented through language that increases cognitive and emotional distance from its consequences, the practice may become less morally salient. Euphemisms thus contribute to the construction of socially acceptable interpretations of practices that would otherwise provoke resistance.

The existing research on dystopian fiction provides an appropriate context for examining this mechanism. Thus, in Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, linguistic control is closely connected with the regulation of gender roles and the suppression of individual identity. The institutional vocabulary contributes to redefining women's social position through categories imposed by the regime. In Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go*, institutional discourse operates primarily through medical, bureaucratic, and apparently caring terminology. The euphemistic terminology surrounding the clones' fate is therefore part of a wider institutional discourse that makes exploitation appear normal rather than exceptional.

In both cases, however, institutional language creates categories through which harmful practices can be interpreted as legitimate, necessary, or socially beneficial. This is where euphemistic framing intersects with identity. Such words as *ceremony*, *donation*, and *completion* do not simply replace direct descriptions of violence, organ extraction, or death, but provide alternative conceptual frames for those events. At the same time, institutional labels such as *handmaid* and *donor* define individuals primarily through the functions assigned to them by the social system, thus depriving them of their true identity.

The present study therefore distinguishes between two related but analytically distinct mechanisms. Euphemistic expressions reframe practices or events by influencing how they are interpreted and evaluated, whereas institutional

³² Stanley M., Neck C. Euphemism as a Powerful Framing Device That Influences Moral Judgments and Punitive Responses After Wrongdoing. *Journal of Applied Psychology*. 2025. 110(5). P. 723.

labels define individuals through socially assigned roles and functions. The two mechanisms may overlap, particularly when an institutional label also has a euphemistic function, but they are not treated as identical in the analysis.

The reviewed studies demonstrate that language, power, and identity in dystopian fiction have already been extensively researched by scholars. Insufficient attention has been paid to how euphemistic lexical choices simultaneously affect two related objects: the representation of the practice and the representation of the person subjected to it. Euphemisms may distance the reader or character from violence, exploitation, or death, while institutional naming may reduce the individual to a socially functional category. The interaction of these mechanisms offers a more precise explanation of how language contributes to the normalization of oppressive social relations.

2. Euphemistic framing and the regulation of identity in dystopian fiction

The analysis shows that euphemization in the three novels operates not simply by replacing unpleasant words with more acceptable ones. Euphemistic expressions systematically change the way violent, exploitative, or identity-destroying practices are represented and evaluated. The study identifies several recurring mechanisms: sacralization, bureaucratic abstraction, medicalization, and deindividualization. Although these mechanisms are associated with different institutional registers, they perform a similar function: they create distance between the individual and the reality of violence and, in doing so, make oppressive practices appear legitimate, routine, or inevitable.

The three novels employ these mechanisms in different ways. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, euphemization is closely connected with religious ideology and bureaucratic administration; in *Never Let Me Go*, it is predominantly associated with medical and institutional discourse; and in *The Giver*, euphemistic language is incorporated into an explicit system of linguistic regulation. A comparative analysis also reveals that the most significant common feature is not the institutional register itself, but the transformation of the human subject into a socially defined function.

Euphemisms and Sacralization in *The Handmaid's Tale*. One of the most prominent forms of euphemization in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is religious-ideological language. Its function is not merely to soften unpleasant realities. It places coercive practices within a religious frame and thereby presents them as legitimate, necessary, and morally sanctioned.

The clearest example is *Ceremony*, the official designation for the ritualized sexual act imposed on Handmaids for reproductive purposes: "*This is the one*

good thing about these evenings, the evenings of the Ceremony: I'm allowed to watch news."³³ "*The Ceremony goes as usual.*"³⁴

The word *Ceremony* evokes associations with ritual, tradition, religious observance, and social order. It originates from the Latin term meaning "what is sacred" or "religious rite."³⁵ None of these associations imply coercion or sexual violence. The phrase *goes as usual* in one of the examples strengthens this effect by presenting the event as an established routine rather than an exceptional act. The result is a shift in evaluation: an act that would otherwise be interpreted as violence is represented as an ordinary component of the social order.

Frame semantics makes this shift particularly visible. A direct designation such as *rape* would activate a frame involving an assailant, a victim, and, crucially, the absence of consent. *Ceremony*, by contrast, activates a ritual frame associated with sanctioned participants, an authorized occasion, and a socially recognized purpose. The crucial element of non-consent is therefore no longer structurally foregrounded. The Commander is therefore presented as an authorized participant in a sanctioned ritual rather than as an aggressor. Offred, the assaulted, is linguistically positioned as a participant rather than a victim. The euphemism therefore does not simply conceal information; it replaces one interpretive structure with another.

This reframing significantly reduces the emotional and evaluative impact of the event. Even when the term *ceremony* occurs alongside an explicitly offensive expression, as in "*the collective rape ceremony*,"³⁶ the ritual connotations of *ceremony* partially mitigate its negative semantic and emotional impact. The euphemistic frame thus remains operative even when the violent referent is made explicit.

This mechanism corresponds to Pinker's observation about the ability of language to frame the same situation in "different and incompatible ways."³⁷ In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the institutional term *Ceremony* makes the ritual frame available while suppressing the frame of sexual violation.

A similar mechanism can be observed in such term as ***Salvaging***. The verb *salvage* normally suggests saving, recovering, or preserving something valuable. Originating from the word *to save*, it acquired multiple meanings – all with the positive seme of rescuing, compensating or even gaining something beneficial from the failure.³⁸ In the context of Gilead, however, the term

³³ Atwood Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Farmington Hills, Mich: Thorndike Press, 2017. P. 149.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, P. 169.

³⁵ Collins. Free Online Dictionary, Thesaurus, and Reference Materials.

³⁶ Atwood Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Farmington Hills, Mich: Thorndike Press, 2017. P. 518.

³⁷ Pinker Steven. *The stuff of thought: language as a window into human nature*. Viking. USA, 2007. P. 4.

³⁸ Collins. Free Online Dictionary, Thesaurus, and Reference Materials.

used for public executions: “*This is a district Salvaging, for women only.*”³⁹ “*Salvaging is always segregated.*” The term euphemistically denotes murder, which is represented as an act of salvation aimed at protecting the community from sinful and dangerous elements.

The positive associations of the word are therefore transferred to an act of state violence. At the same time, the short and procedural formulation makes the event sound administrative rather than violent. Even the narrator of the story, the Handmaid, talks about it in neutral tone: “*The football stadium is that way too, where they hold the Men’s Salvagings. As well as the football games.*”⁴⁰

The euphemism consequently creates emotional distance while presenting execution as part of an organized moral system.

The same pattern is evident in the neologism **Participation**, which combines the semantic elements of *participation* and *execution*. As the narrator explains: “*You know the rules of Participation <...> You will wait until I blow the whistle. After that, what you do is up to you...*”⁴¹ The handmaids are officially encouraged to participate in the administration of justice by killing a man who is presented to them as an assailant. In reality, however, the event constitutes an act of collective violence that allows the women to release their accumulated frustration and despair, while simultaneously enabling the authorities to shift responsibility for the killing onto the Handmaids and prevent the violence from being redirected against the regime itself. The neologism *Participation* therefore masks collective violence under the guise of a legitimate legal procedure and civic duty.

Similar euphemistic neologism, **Prayvaganza**, is a blend of *prayer* and *extravaganza*. It refers to large-scale religious gatherings connected with such practices as arranged marriages and public executions. The hybrid form combines the vocabulary of religious devotion with that of celebration and spectacle.

These examples demonstrate that religious-ideological euphemisms in Atwood’s novel perform a process of sacralization. Violence is not simply hidden; it is incorporated into a religious discourse that gives it moral legitimacy. This linguistic reframing also affects the representation of the people subjected to violence: once coercion is presented as a sacred ritual, the victim can be represented as a participant in an established social order.

Bureaucratic Euphemisms in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. A different mechanism is found in the bureaucratic vocabulary used to describe punishment, displacement, and forced labour. Unlike the religious euphemisms that legitimize violence by placing it within a sacred and morally sanctioned

³⁹ Atwood Margaret. *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Farmington Hills, Mich: Thorndike Press, 2017. P. 464.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, P. 65.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, P. 475.

framework, bureaucratic euphemisms make coercive practices appear ordinary and acceptable by presenting them as routine institutional procedures.

The most prominent example can be observed in the designation *the Colonies*. The noun *Colonies* carries relatively neutral meaning and even offers historical association with the 13 states forming the original United States of America when they declared their independence.⁴² However, in Atwood's text it stands for the toxic labour camps to which people are sent to clean up radioactive waste: "*In the Colonies, they spend their time cleaning up. ... Sometimes it's just the bodies, after a battle. The ones in the city ghettos are the worst, they're left around longer, they get rottener. ... So the women in the Colonies there do the burning. The other Colonies are worse, though, the toxic dumps and the radiation spills. They figure you've got three years maximum, at those, before your nose falls off and your skins pulls away like rubber gloves.*"⁴³

The apparently neutral geographical term obscures the punitive and violent nature of the institution: rather than explicitly referring to forced labour, environmental exposure, and the eventual death of those sent there, the bureaucratic euphemism *the Colonies* presents the place as an ordinary social institution. It is considerably less emotionally charged than the place it designates and therefore distances the reader from the material reality of punishment and contributes to its normalization.

In the example, "*The old ones they send off to the Colonies right away*"⁴⁴ the grammatical structure of the sentence contributes to the same effect. The impersonal construction with *they* leaves the agent of the action unexpressed. Responsibility is consequently backgrounded at the grammatical as well as lexical level. Such related expression as *Resettlement* ("*Resettlement of the Children of Ham is continuing on schedule*"⁴⁵) operates in a similar manner. The attention is shifted from individual experience to administrative procedure. A person is no longer represented as someone who is forcibly removed, punished, or exposed to lethal conditions, but as an object of institutional management.

The central mechanism here is therefore *abstraction*. Bureaucratic euphemism does not necessarily deny the existence of violence; instead, it removes the concrete human experience from the foreground and recasts it as an impersonal institutional process. The resulting linguistic distance reduces the emotional salience of the referent and makes institutional violence appear routine and less disturbing.

⁴² Collins. Free Online Dictionary, Thesaurus, and Reference Materials.

⁴³ Atwood Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Farmington Hills, Mich: Thorndike Press, 2017. P. 431.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, P. 382

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, P. 151

This distinction between religious and bureaucratic euphemization is important. In the first case, violence is sacralized; in the second, it is administratively neutralized. Both strategies, however, contribute to the same broader process of normalization.

Medical Euphemisms in *Never Let Me Go*. In Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, euphemization is constructed primarily through medical and institutional vocabulary. Unlike Atwood's religious language, which openly seeks to legitimize the social order, Ishiguro's euphemisms operate through restraint, routine, and clinical neutrality.

The central example is *donation* – the noun that activates the semantic frame of charity, gift, contribution, voluntary giving, and generosity.⁴⁶ Ishiguro maintains a neutral, and at times even positive, tone when referring to donations: “*We still didn’t discuss the donations and all that went with them; we still found the whole area awkward enough. But it became something we made jokes about in much the same way we joked about sex.*”⁴⁷ In the context of the novel, however, *donation* is an institutional term for the removal of organs from clones, who have been raised specifically for this purpose.

Another example, “*He’d just come through his third donation,*”⁴⁸ demonstrates how additional linguistic features contribute to the normalization of the process. The adverb *just* gives the statement a casual, matter-of-fact quality, while the ordinal expression *third donation* presents the procedure as one stage in a predictable and repeated sequence. The violent reality of organ removal is consequently reframed through the much more positive semantic frame of giving.

A direct description such as *organ removal* would foreground an external agent performing the procedure and an individual subjected to it. *Donation*, by contrast, activates a *Giving frame* in which the person whose organ is transferred occupies the role of Donor. This role normally implies willingness and consent.

The euphemism therefore not only makes the procedure sound less frightening. It linguistically assigns the person subjected to forcible organ removals a role associated with voluntary action. The individual whose body is being exploited is represented as someone who *gives*. Moreover, the recipient of the donation is rarely made explicit, leaving the social purpose and beneficiaries of the procedure largely in the background.

Similar to Atwood's euphemism *Ceremony*, Ishiguro's *donation* reduces the linguistic visibility of coercion and weakens the ethical salience of violence.

⁴⁶ Collins. Free Online Dictionary, Thesaurus, and Reference Materials.

⁴⁷ Ishiguro Kazuo. *Never Let Me Go*. Faber & Faber Limited, 2010. P. 83.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, P. 5.

Another central expression is *completion*, which refers to death:

"I heard about Chrissie, I heard about how she completed during her second donation."⁴⁹ Another example: "...after the fourth donation, even if you've technically completed, you're still conscious in some sort of way..."⁵⁰

The verb *completed* presents death as the successful conclusion of a process. Rather than foregrounding loss, suffering, or premature death, it suggests fulfilment and closure. The expression thus turns a violent end into a predictable stage in an institutional procedure.

The euphemistic system of *Never Let Me Go* is particularly effective because it is not rhetorically spectacular. Its language is calm, repetitive, and almost ordinary. The characters have internalized the institutional vocabulary to such an extent that terms such as *donation* and *completion* rarely require explanation. The absence of explicit linguistic resistance is itself significant: the system does not need to constantly justify violence if its victims have already learned to describe it in the language provided by the institution.

Thus, medical euphemization in Ishiguro's novel operates primarily through clinical normalization. Ethical horror is recoded as routine medical procedure, while the vocabulary of treatment and contribution obscures the coercive structure underlying it.

3. Euphemisms, Institutional Naming, and the Regulation of Identity

A further function of euphemisms in the novels under analysis is the replacement of personal identity with institutionally defined social roles.

Naming and the Construction of Social Roles. Here, euphemism should be understood more broadly as part of a system of *identity-regulating institutional naming*. These expressions do not necessarily soften a referent in the conventional sense; rather, they replace the individual with a socially useful category.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the names *Offred* and *Ofglen* are constructed through the possessive *of* followed by the Commander's name. The protagonist explicitly reflects on the loss of her original name: "*My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden.*"⁵¹

The imposed name transforms a personal identity into a relational designation. The woman is linguistically defined through her relationship to the Commander rather than through her own history or individuality. The naming system therefore performs the same broader operation as the euphemisms

⁴⁹ Ibid., P. 221.

⁵⁰ Ibid., P. 274.

⁵¹ Atwood Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Farmington Hills, Mich: Thorndike Press, 2017. P. 72.

discussed above: it shifts attention from the person to the function assigned to her by the regime.

The term **Handmaid** itself contributes to this process. Its associations with service and attendance conceal the reproductive exploitation that defines the women's social position. The word presents a coerced reproductive role as a recognized social function.

A comparable process occurs in *Never Let Me Go*. The term **student** initially places the protagonists within the familiar social frame of education: "*There were all kinds of possibilities open to us Hailsham students that weren't open to them.*"⁵²

The label encourages the characters to understand themselves as ordinary young people whose future remains open. Later, however, the institutional term **donor** increasingly defines them according to their biological function. The shift from *student* to *donor* is therefore more than a change of vocabulary. It marks a narrowing of social identity: the individual is progressively reduced from a person with possible futures to a body assigned a particular institutional purpose.

The same principle is developed in *The Giver*, although Lowry makes linguistic regulation much more explicit.

Euphemisms and Linguistic Discipline in *The Giver*. Unlike Atwood's theocratic regime and Ishiguro's clinical institution, Lois Lowry's community explicitly makes linguistic control part of its socialization system. The principle of **Precision of Language** is taught to children as a basic social norm: "*And precision of language was one of the most important tasks of small children.*"⁵³ And they received very specific instructions: "*...the reason for precision of language was to ensure that unintentional lies were never uttered.*"⁵⁴

Consequently, *The Giver* provides a particularly interesting case because euphemistic language is not merely used by the institution: the regulation of language itself becomes an instrument of institutional control.

Perhaps the most quoted euphemism in *The Giver* is the word **release** which in typical contexts activates the semes of setting someone free, making available, relieving, etc.⁵⁵ However, in the novel this euphemism is used as a community term for killing infants who fail to develop adequately, people who repeatedly violate the rules, and the elderly at the end of their designated lifespan. For much of the novel, *release* is presented as a neutral administrative process. The expression does not explicitly name death; instead, it suggests

⁵² Ishiguro Kazuo. *Never Let Me Go*. Faber & Faber Limited, 2010. P. 163.

⁵³ Lowry Lois. *The Giver*. Houghton Mifflin Company. Boston, 2004. P. 55.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, P.71

⁵⁵ Collins. *Free Online Dictionary, Thesaurus, and Reference Materials*.

movement away from the community: “If he were released, they would not see him again. Ever. Those who were released – even as newchildren – were sent Elsewhere and never returned to the community.”⁵⁶

Unlike Ishiguro’s *completion* which represents death as the end of a process, *release* represents death as *departure* to *Elsewhere* – a related expression reinforcing the idea of a destination rather than an ending of life. Together, the two terms remove death from the immediate semantic field and replace it with the language of movement and relocation.

Among other interesting euphemisms in Lowry’s novel – the term *newchild* / *newchildren* – the expression that does not simply describe an infant; it places the individual within a predetermined administrative category. This is comparable to the movement from *student* to *donor* in *Never Let Me Go*: in both cases, institutional terminology defines the individual through a socially assigned status. At this stage, the child is totally deprived of any rights. It might be even killed (*released*), if it weighs slightly less than the established norm. In Lowry’s community, *newchild* is just a carefully selected object similar to a vessel that still waits to be filled – in this case with the precise vocabulary and rules of behaviour.

Birthmother provides an even closer parallel with Atwood’s *Handmaid*. Both terms employ vocabulary associated with reproduction and care, but both define women whose reproductive function is separated from ordinary maternal identity. In Lowry’s novel, the Birthmother gives birth but is not permitted to establish a parental relationship with the child: “the Birthmothers never even get to see newchildren.”⁵⁷ The word therefore retains the vocabulary of motherhood while removing its emotional and social meaning. The woman giving birth to a child just performs a certain function and after three births will be “disposed of” to do hard manual labor for the community.

The comparison with *The Handmaid’s Tale* is particularly interesting here. Both *Handmaid* and *Birthmother* draw on relational vocabulary to designate roles defined by the institutional suppression of precisely those relationships. Euphemization therefore operates through a form of *lexical irony*: the language of care and kinship is used to describe a system that denies both care and kinship.

One more term – *Stirrings* refers to adolescent sexual desire and illustrates another form of euphemistic *abstraction*. The expression is deliberately vague and avoids directly naming sexual desire. “Though the feelings were confused, he thought that he had liked the feelings that his mother had called Stirrings. He remembered that upon waking, he had wanted to feel the Stirrings again.”⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Lowry Lois. *The Giver*. Houghton Mifflin Company. Boston, 2004. P. 43.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, P. 22.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, P. 39.

Their suppression through medication (“*Stirrings must be reported in order for treatment to take place*”⁵⁹) further demonstrates the relationship between linguistic and bodily regulation: an aspect of individual development is first given a neutral label and then treated as something that must be medically controlled.

These expressions show that euphemisms in *The Giver* operate through several related mechanisms: administrative classification, lexical displacement, and semantic vagueness. At the same time, the novel differs from Atwood’s and Ishiguro’s in one important respect. Its explicit doctrine of *Precision of Language* makes the relationship between vocabulary and social control visible within the fictional world itself as the regulation of language is openly acknowledged by the society. The society institutionalizes control over the very process of naming, so euphemistic meanings become part of what counts as linguistically “correct.”

Taken together, the three novels demonstrate that institutional language transforms individual identity by replacing personal and relational identities with socially assigned categories. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, names such as *Handmaid*, *Ofglen*, and *Offred* define women through their relationship to the patriarchal system and its male authorities. In *Never Let Me Go*, the progression from *student* to *donor* similarly shifts attention from the characters’ personal identities to their institutional function. In *The Giver*, terms such as *newchild* and *Birthmother* classify individuals according to their predetermined roles within the community. Although these forms of naming differ in their linguistic structure and ideological context, they perform a similar function: they make institutional roles more salient than individual identities and thereby facilitate the social order’s control over the individual.

At the same time, the three novels suggest that such control is not complete. Offred’s narrative, the characters’ growing awareness in *Never Let Me Go*, and Jonas’s developing sensitivity to language in *The Giver* demonstrate that alternative ways of naming and describing experience can challenge institutional definitions. Language thus functions in dystopian discourse both as a means of imposing socially prescribed identities and as a potential means of recognizing their constructed nature.

CONCLUSIONS

The comparative analysis demonstrates that language functions as an important instrument of social control in the three dystopian societies, shaping both the interpretation of institutional practices and the ways individuals are defined within them. Different forms of institutional language, including

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 37.

euphemistic expressions, functional labels, and regulated vocabulary, contribute to making coercive practices appear legitimate, ordinary, or necessary and to reducing individuals to socially assigned roles.

Euphemisms are particularly significant within this system because they allow violence, exploitation, and death to be represented through less disturbing or institutionally acceptable terms, reducing their emotional and ethical salience without erasing their underlying reality.

The analysis identifies several related strategies of identity regulation. Semantic incongruity is evident when vocabulary associated with care, service, or kinship is used to designate roles that deny or undermine the relationships these terms conventionally evoke, as in *Handmaid* and *Birthingmother*. Emotionally and evaluatively distancing vocabulary, illustrated by *donation* and *Stirrings*, recasts bodily experiences and practices in less disturbing or institutionally acceptable terms. Administrative classification defines individuals primarily through institutional status or function, as in *student*, *donor*, and *newchild*. Atwood's possessive naming system, represented by *Offred* and *Ofglen*, constitutes a related but distinct form of identity regulation, since personal identity is replaced not through gradual relabeling but through direct appropriation by the institutional order.

Across the three novels, institutional language does not make violence disappear; rather, it changes the terms in which violence is understood, evaluated, and ultimately normalized. Euphemisms constitute one important mechanism through which this process occurs, while institutional naming and linguistic discipline further restrict the ways individuals can understand and articulate their own identities.

The present study is limited to three dystopian novels selected because of the prominence and structural significance of euphemistic and institutionally regulated language in their narratives. Further research could test the applicability of the categories identified in this study to a broader corpus of dystopian fiction. Corpus-based research could additionally investigate the frequency and distribution of euphemistic expressions, while experimental approaches could explore whether different forms of euphemistic framing produce measurable differences in readers' emotional and evaluative responses to representations of violence.

SUMMARY

The study examines the role of euphemistic and institutionally regulated language in the representation of violence and the regulation of individual identity in dystopian fiction. The research focuses on Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, and Lois Lowry's *The*

Giver. The analysis considers euphemistic expressions as linguistic strategies that reframe socially unacceptable, violent, or exploitative practices through less threatening semantic and institutional frames. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which euphemistic vocabulary creates distance from violence, reduces its negative evaluative force, and contributes to its normalization. The analysis identifies recurrent strategies including the reframing of violence through positive or socially sanctioned associations, the use of emotionally neutralizing and institutional vocabulary, and the replacement of direct representations with abstract or procedural designations. The study also demonstrates that euphemistic and institutionally imposed naming can contribute to the regulation of individual identity by replacing personal and relational identities with socially assigned roles and functions. The comparative analysis reveals both common patterns and differences in the linguistic mechanisms employed by the three dystopian societies, including religious, medical, bureaucratic, and administrative forms of language control. The findings suggest that dystopian euphemization does not make alternative interpretations impossible but contributes to making particular representations of violence, social roles, and institutional practices appear ordinary, legitimate, and socially acceptable.

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