

# SEXUALLY EXPLICIT EUPHEMISM IN MARTIN AMIS'S *YELLOW DOG*. MITIGATION OR OFFENCE?

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## 1. Introduction

Language users resort to euphemistic substitution to mitigate the potential dangers of certain taboo words or phrases considered too blunt or offensive for a given social situation. Hence, euphemism has traditionally provided a way to speak about the unspeakable, about those subjects banned from the public domain. Among these, sex has usually met the strongest interdiction, which is why constitutes a faithful indicator of the degree of tolerance (or repression) of societies throughout history. In fact, in those periods characterized by moral and social censorship, such as Victorian England, the taboo on sex proved to be more powerful than any verbal mitigation, and sexual concepts were thus commonly silenced in public discourse.<sup>1</sup>

However, nowadays the public use of terms referring to sexual organs and sexual play has become common, even in print where the greater degree of formality is supposed, at least in theory, to erect certain barriers against bawdy language. As Epstein (1985: 57) pointed out, in our era, Western permissive societies have abandoned the silence on sexual topics for an explicit reference to this taboo: “[...] silence on the subject of sex has been broken, and it is unlikely to be restored. Sex throughout history has been on most people’s minds, but in this century it has increasingly been on almost everyone’s tongue as well”. Therefore, though the

sexual taboo still imposes certain restrictions in our time,<sup>2</sup> sex is by no means limited to implicit, vague or indirect references; indeed, an explicit treatment of this taboo coexists with implicit allusions to sexual issues in contemporary literary language.

The main aim of this paper is to provide an overview of a euphemistic modality that I shall call ‘explicit euphemism’, i.e. a means of dealing with the realm of sex while avoiding the coarse words, especially the so-called ‘four-letter words’ related to sex (*cunt*, *fuck*, etc.). This seems to be a worthy concern, because whilst there is a substantial body of literature on sexual euphemism (Epstein 1985; Allan and Burridge 1991: 75-116; Ham 2005), including recent studies on the metaphorical conceptualization of the taboo of sex (Chamizo Domínguez and Sánchez Benedito 2000; Crespo Fernández 2006a), not much scholarly ink has been spilled over specific modes of verbal mitigation. To the best of my knowledge, there have been no studies until now to cover the explicit treatment of sex as a euphemistic modality, and only Allan and Burridge (1991: 210-220) and Crespo Fernández (2006b) have dealt with artful euphemism as a specific category of connotative attenuation in literary texts. Consequently, the present paper intends to explore the patterns of explicit euphemism via examples excerpted from Martin Amis’s *Yellow Dog*. With this purpose in mind, after first introducing the novel and its author, I will comment on previous research on euphemism and attempt to justify the existence of explicit euphemism as a specific modality of verbal mitigation in terms of its distinctive features. In order to give insight into the incidence of this category in the novel aforementioned, the second part of the study will analyse the presence of explicit euphemism in the novel and the final part will offer a glossary of the terms encountered.

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## 2. Amis and sexual taboos

The range of ways of dealing with sex in contemporary fiction and, by extension, in today’s communicative practice is undoubtedly great. One can approach sex ironically, tenderly, poetically or, as happens with certain authors, brutally and toughly. This seems to be the case with Martin Amis, who has been thought to embody the wildest side of British contemporary narrative since he made his appearance in the seventies with provocative and ‘non-politically correct’ novels such as *Dead Babies* (1975). His fiction is well known, apart from its black humour or amoral characters, for its explicit, violent and rough treatment of the taboo of sex. Amis is an expert at violating sexual taboos; in fact, references to prostitution, pornography, incest and sexual excess are common in his fiction. In this respect, *Yellow Dog* (2003), the subject of the present paper, is not an exception. Indeed,

it constitutes a representative example of how sexual taboos are dealt with in Amis's narrative and, at the same time, provides an insight into sexual euphemistic reference in today's printed matter. The novel has the stamp of its author, which means, as Shilling (2003) argues, a sense of disquiet, the feeling that today's social and moral standards are on the verge of collapse:

[T]he sensation of picking up *Yellow Dog* is like that of settling back into the driving seat of the first car you ever owned: everything is exactly where you expect it to be: fear-check. Loathing-check. People without moral spirit-levels doing unspeakable things to each other-check.

*Yellow Dog* has been considered a controversial novel and has given rise to different reactions among critics, who have either complimented or criticized it.<sup>3</sup> In any case, this novel provides the reader with a particular portrait of present-day British society through a combination of plots, each with its particular social and verbal register and with a common link: sex, much of which is accessible to the reader through a particular mode of euphemism, one which abandons implicitness and ambiguity in favour of a direct designation of the taboo, as will be seen in the following sections.

### **3. The framework of euphemism**

Before attempting to formulate explicit euphemism as a specific category of verbal attenuation, it is advisable to provide an account of the approaches that the concept *euphemism* has received. Though relatively scarce (cf. Chamizo Domínguez forthcoming), research on linguistic interdiction has provided different, though complementary, insights into this subject. In traditional scholarship, euphemism was primarily considered to be a purely lexical phenomenon employed to replace words and phrases deemed unfit for polite linguistic usage with milder or indirect equivalents. In this sense, figures such as Ullmann (1962) and Leech (1974) tended to consider euphemism as a strictly lexical process which resorted to ambiguous, mild and polite-sounding words. That this was so can be gathered from Leech (1974: 53): “[euphemism] consists of replacing a word which has offensive connotations with another expression, which makes no overt reference to the unpleasant side of the subject, and may even be a positive misnomer”.

From the 1980s onwards, scholars made an important step forward by claiming that to reduce euphemism to a one-for-one lexical substitution would be to lose sight of the discursive euphemistic maneuvers that largely influence the euphemistic process. In this respect, Montero Cartelle (1981) and Casas Gómez (1986) adopted a twofold perspective and focused both on the semantic aspects of

euphemism and on the contextual and pragmatic factors governing the euphemistic change. Especially noteworthy is the seminal work by Allan and Burrige (1991), in which the pragmatic dimension of euphemism receives special emphasis. In fact, these scholars considered euphemism in terms of face effects, as a phenomenon closely linked to the norms of politeness and style, and defined it as follows: “A euphemism is used as an alternative to a dispreferred expression, in order to avoid possible loss of face, either one’s face or, through giving offence, that of the audience, or of some third party” (Allan and Burrige 1991: 23).

Euphemism is thus, from this standpoint, basically a pragmatic phenomenon, an approach followed by different studies looking at euphemism in a discourse frame, subject to the social conventions of the pragmatic context surrounding the participants in the communicative exchange. In this vein, Crespo Fernández (2005b) considers euphemism to be a form of verbal behaviour governed by conventions of politeness and face concerns. In connection with this, the study carried out by Abrantes (2005), is of particular interest. She views euphemism as a pragmatic strategy both speaker-oriented and hearer-oriented which reveals a particular attitude towards the taboo subject; euphemism is, from her viewpoint, a face-saving mechanism which supports co-operation in discourse and reflects the semantic collaboration between the parties involved.

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Likewise, the discursive nature of euphemism is highlighted by recent studies (Chamizo Domínguez and Sánchez Benedito 2000; Crespo Fernández 2007) that paint a full portrait of euphemism in both its semantic and pragmatic dimensions. It must be said that these studies pay special attention to its semantic features, analysing euphemism in terms on the well-known model of the conceptual metaphor initiated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980).<sup>4</sup> This cognitive approach has also been applied to euphemism from a more specific view in other studies related to different forbidden areas such as sex (Crespo Fernández 2006a) and death (Marín Arrese 1996; Bultnick 1998; Crespo Fernández 2006c).

Beyond the specific perspectives adopted in each case, it can be deduced from the above sources that euphemism resorts to indirect lexical alternatives which, thanks to the ambiguity established between the linguistic sign and the taboo, are capable of generating a contrast, effectively carried out via novel metaphors, that maintains the mitigating capacity in a given pragmatic and phraseological context. However, this view of euphemism does not always apply to actual communicative practice. It should be borne in mind that euphemism is, after all, a pragmatic phenomenon, and, as such, largely dependent on extra-linguistic issues. In fact, every historical period cultivates and develops its own euphemisms, which become revealing indicators of the habits and censorships of its society (cf. Crespo Fernández 2007: 133). Accordingly, the current more permissive attitude towards taboo words

concerning sex requires a new approach to euphemism as a result of the increasing acceptance of sexual topics in private and public discourse in our time. In this respect, though beyond the scope of this article, it must be noted that explicitness in euphemism is not restricted to sex, as nowadays social acceptance has been extended to other taboos traditionally subject to a high degree of interdiction, such as scatology. Indeed, in the novel in question, explicit euphemism also takes place in terms like *evacuation* (146)<sup>5</sup> or *micturation* (315), used to avoid 'four-letter words' related to scatological bodily functions.

Given the above-mentioned changing nature of taboos and euphemisms, it comes as no surprise that the concept of euphemism itself should also be subject to change and redefinition. Just as the escape from the vulgar word is by no means limited in today's language to implicit, vague or indirect references, so the traditional concept of euphemism should be expanded to include those lexical substitutes dealing with former unmentionable taboos by means of items which, rather than a real mitigation of the concept, merely offer a way of avoiding the coarse word. For instance, *fellatio* and *vulva* are learned terms which refer to the taboos they represent ('oral sex' and 'female pudenda') in an explicit and unambiguous manner. Nonetheless, these terms fulfil the main function of euphemism insofar as they substitute words deemed unacceptable in social discourse, in this case *blow* and *cunt* respectively. From this perspective, the explicit treatment of the sexual subject does not necessarily imply an uneuphemistic approach to the taboo; rather, the lexical choice is a means of leaving out the coarse word which stands out as the real taboo. Hence, this type of alternative to the taboo has not lost its status as euphemism, which is why I label this particular mitigation of linguistic taboos as *explicit euphemism*. The following chapter will be devoted to exploring the most distinctive patterns of this euphemistic modality in comparison and contrast with the conventional features of euphemistic variation.

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### **3. Patterns of explicit euphemism**

As suggested above, for establishing explicit euphemism as a category of verbal attenuation, it is necessary to adopt a more comprehensive view than the one expressed in the study of linguistic interdiction. Since the standards of social acceptability of sexual issues have undergone considerable change in present-day society, euphemism in contemporary discourse should not be limited to indirect and vague substitutions. After all, explicit euphemism maintains the euphemistic function of replacing linguistic taboos, though it presents specific patterns which greatly differ from the orthodox euphemistic features and permits this mode of verbal mitigation to be accounted for as a euphemistic category *per se*, as will be discussed below.

### 3.1. Direct reference to the taboo without ambiguity

Ambiguity is a defining feature of euphemism as a linguistic phenomenon. Following Chamizo Domínguez and Sánchez Benedito (2000: 40-41), a term acts as a euphemism because, in a given context, it is capable of generating an ambiguity which suggests that there may be a distasteful concept beneath and thus it permits the mitigation of the taboo. The euphemistic item is ambiguous insofar as it can be understood both in terms of its literal meaning and in terms of its taboo meaning. Nevertheless, explicit euphemism is unambiguous by nature, since the substitute and the taboo referent are so closely connected that the reference to the taboo is quite evident; in fact, the literal meaning of the word usually coincides with its sexual meaning, as happens with *phallus* or *penis* which automatically evoke the male organ used to copulate. What is more, there is not an alternative meaning in the explicit euphemistic word or phrase which could ameliorate the concept, since there is not an intention on the part of the speaker or writer to veil or disguise the reality whatsoever.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, this modality of verbal mitigation is closely tied to the referent and, consequently, tends to present a very low degree of ambiguity.

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### 3.2. No lexical neutralization of the taboo

In euphemistic substitution, the word or phrase chosen to tone down the concept shares certain conceptual traits with the linguistic taboo, though it moves away from its literal meaning with the purpose of reaching the lexical neutralization of the forbidden topic. This neutralization, as Montero Cartelle (1981: 41-42) suggests, enables the adoption of new ameliorative senses thanks to the temporal suspension of those conceptual traits considered inappropriate in a given communicative context. However, in explicit euphemism there is no such neutralization of the tabooed connotations which are easily recognizable in the lexical alternative to the coarse word. This happens with many of the explicit euphemistic substitutes found in the novel, such as *ejaculation*, *genitalia*, *masturbation*, etc., which are totally unable to neutralize the sexual connotations of their referents, as they do not have any emotionally positive connotations with regard to the taboo (cf. Chamizo Domínguez forthcoming). In fact, these terms are so close to the taboo referents they designate that they simply constitute a way of leaving out overtly dysphemistic terms.

### 3.3. Use of lexicalized metaphors

When explicit euphemism resorts to figurative language to carry out the substitution, it tends to employ a lexicalized metaphor, i.e. one in which the figurative sense is identified with its referent due to its intimate association with the distasteful thing that it names and thus loses its metaphorical status (Chamizo

Domínguez and Sánchez Benedito 2000: 68-70).<sup>7</sup> As a result, the lexical alternative to the taboo acquires the meaning that it was supposed to veil, picking up its offensive connotations (cf. Burridge 2004: 212-214; Crespo Fernández 2007: 86-87). This is the case of *intercourse*, which started as a metaphor (its original meaning was 'communication') but, over the course of time, it underwent a process of lexicalization of the tabooed connotations, which is why it undoubtedly refers now to the referent it stands for ('copulation'). Thus, rather than a real mitigation of the taboo, *intercourse* constitutes an alternative to a 'four-letter word' such as *fuck*.

As a result of the intimate association of the taboo and the supposedly mitigating lexical alternative, the latter does not allow for a real mitigation of the forbidden topic; in fact, at times it is difficult to know whether to label certain lexical alternatives to the taboo as euphemistic or dysphemistic, as mitigating or offensive. This also happens with the semi-lexicalized metaphor *sex weapon* 'penis', which responds to preexisting metaphorical associations deriving from the sex-as-violence conceptual metaphor which form part of the receiver's cognitive system (cf. Lakoff 1994: 210).

#### 3.4. Low mitigating capacity

The patterns of explicit euphemism discussed in the preceding sections greatly affect the mitigating capacity of the items that fall under this euphemistic modality. In fact, explicit euphemism presents a very low mitigating effectiveness due to its intimate association (in some cases, identification) with the taboo. Clearly, in euphemistic manipulation the mitigating capacity primarily depends on the contrast between the euphemistic sign and its taboo referent, a contrast which, in turn, motivates the ambiguity of the word or phrase in its reference to the taboo topic. After all, as Burridge (2004: 224) argues, vagueness increases euphemistic force, as happens with a generic term like *business* 'pornography' (294), that fulfils their euphemistic function in a satisfactory way thanks to its intrinsic vagueness. Nonetheless, if there is no contrast between the taboo referent and the lexical option used to designate it, the substitute will tend to be identified with the taboo and will not be capable of toning down its unacceptable traits. Consider the example that follows:

He there-after relied on escort girls, entertained in various London hotels; and even these encounters were far from frictionless. The truth was that when it came to love, to the old story, [...] Clint Smoker had a little problem. (29)

The explicit euphemistic items *escort girls* and *encounters*—fixed in the lexicon with a sexual sense— have been stripped of the mitigating capacity they once possessed

and present an undeviating reference to sexual taboos. The writer's intention here is by no means to hide the sexual issues, but merely to escape from the dysphemistic terms *whore* and *fuck* respectively. In so doing, Amis deliberately avoids shockingly coarse violations of the taboo which would not fit in the phraseological context because of its formal register and the presence of another euphemism like *love* 'sexual relationships'. After all, one of the functions of euphemism in literature — a function fulfilled by the explicit euphemisms in the above example— is to serve as a style marker and adjust the linguistic register employed by the characters or the narrative voice to the situation (Crespo Fernández 2006b: 77).

### 3.5. Contextually relevant

Taking into account the unambiguous nature of the phenomenon under research, many of the explicit euphemisms encountered in *Yellow Dog* can be virtually identified with the sexual taboos they substitute regardless of context. In fact, technical words used to refer to sexual organs (*organ*, *semen*, *vulva*) and learned words of a Latin origin (*cunnilingus*, *paedophilia*, *rectum*) automatically evoke a sexual referent without the help of any contextual clues. Though not so contextually-free, colloquial phrases lexicalized with a sexual meaning (*go to bed*, *have sex*, *sleep with*) or terms with undeviating sexual connotations (*arousal*, *stimulation*) are associated with the realm of sex at first glance. All this seems to contradict a defining feature of euphemism: its contextual dependence. Burridge (1996: 43) puts the matter in the following way:

[T]here is an assumption that language is a kind of monolithic entity with some sort of fixed set of approved meanings and values. Yet no term is intrinsically dysphemistic, or for that matter euphemistic; [...]. Words aren't mathematical symbols. Normally the choice between alternative expressions depends entirely on context —it's a matter of style.

What emerges from these contextual issues, following the theory of relevance proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1995), is that explicit euphemism is contextually relevant, as it does not require a great processing effort to be comprehended in its context. In fact, given that explicit euphemisms are so transparent, the receiver immediately recognizes the sexual referent behind the word and thus stops processing at the first interpretation, satisfying his expectation of relevance. Thus, the explicit lexical alternative permits the reception of cognitive effects while minimizing the receiver's cognitive effort. A good case in point of this contextual relevance is the explicit euphemism *go to bed*, which no doubt refers to its taboo ('copulate') in the following example: "In those days, for a while, girls went to bed with you even when they didn't want to" (99).



### 3.6. Communicatively efficient

As the euphemistic process leaves out the direct reference to the taboo subject and replaces it by an indirect and vague lexical option, euphemism seems to contradict the principle of efficiency in communication, as pointed out by Abrantes (2005: 92-93). In fact, euphemism responds, rather than to the need for an effective communication, to the need for expressivity in discourse, as it provides an emotional response to the discomfort that taboos produce in the communicative exchange for the parties involved. From this perspective, Abrantes claims that euphemism is primarily a hearer-oriented strategy which allows the hearer to be aware of the speaker's dissatisfaction with the undeviating reference to the taboo and, by extension, with the taboo itself. However, by resorting to explicit euphemism, the speaker communicates the taboo subject more efficiently, reducing the linguistic effort in conveying a given sexual topic by means of direct lexical options. Thus, euphemistic explicitness responds to a speaker-oriented strategy which tends to disregard psychological motivations and merely favour the speaker's need to avoid a 'four-letter word'.

## 4. Sexually explicit euphemism in *Yellow Dog*

In *Yellow Dog* euphemism acts as a mode of dealing with sex in 334 cases, apart from 15 references to homosexuality as a way of avoiding personal offence (Crespo Fernández 2005: 301-302).<sup>8</sup> Of these instances of euphemistic naming, explicitness appears in 124 substitutions, that is, this category covers about 37% of the sexual vocabulary employed in the novel. As sexual euphemism is such a broad concept and so relevant in quantitative terms, in order to be more precise, in the table below the total number of euphemistic substitution is specified in each domain, followed by the number of explicit euphemisms recorded:

Coition	83	27	Prostitution	15	5
Bodily parts	60	31	Sexual dysfunctions	11	2
Sexual variants	32	8	General aspects <sup>9</sup>	10	4
Desire and excitation	25	12	Masturbation	8	3
Incest and paedophilia	25	4	Homosexual coition	6	4
Orgasm	16	9	Female underwear	6	2
Pornography	16	7	Others	21	6

TABLE 1: Areas of sexual euphemism and explicit euphemism in *Yellow Dog*

The first noticeable quality is the prominent role of sexual taboos in Amis's novel. This is a proof that in contemporary Western society sexual censorship has given way to permissiveness; in fact, the table above clearly shows that allusions to sexual areas with a high degree of interdiction (incest, masturbation, orgasm, etc.) are not banned in print. In references to these taboos, explicit euphemism undoubtedly plays a crucial role, given that, as indicated before, over one third of the sexual euphemism recorded falls under this euphemistic category. This seems to confirm that the author's prime aim is not to mitigate the taboo; rather, Amis tends to speak plainly about sex by means of a particular mode of euphemism which abandons ambiguity in favour of a direct designation of the taboo. Indeed, in *Yellow Dog* explicit euphemism facilitates a socially acceptable reference to tabooed body parts and sexual practices. In this regard, terms used to refer to masturbation (*onanistic*), genitalia (*male member, vulva*), sexual play (*anal sex, cunnilingus, touch*) or sexual excitation (*arousal, hard, stimulation*) are included in this euphemistic modality.

Euphemism relative to bodily parts is also worth mentioning. Out of the 60 euphemisms extracted from the novel (31 explicit euphemisms), 16 are related to female intimate parts (*breasts, nipples or the intima*) and 15 to masculine sexual organs (*organ, penis or phallus*). It is interesting to note that Amis employs learned words and, above all, technicisms to refer to genitalia, which constitutes an evident proof of his purpose to treat sex straight on regardless of the strength of the taboo. By so doing, Amis makes use of the two possible ways of dealing with the realm of sex, as pointed out by Epstein (1985: 57): to speak about it clinically (*genitalia, rectum, vulva*, etc.) as well as plainly and profanely (*doggy, fisting and handjob*, among others). Verbal disguise is also partially achieved by means of strategies which, rather than a concealment of the taboo word, call the sexual concepts to mind, such as graphological deletions (*c\*\*t, f\*\*k and f\*\*king*) and alphanumeric formations (*fell8tio* 'fellatio', *oral 6* 'oral sex' and *4play* 'foreplay').<sup>10</sup>

The vocabulary used in the world of pornography constitutes a breeding ground for sexual explicit euphemism. Amis presents strongly tabooed concepts in an open way, for instance sexual variants usually found in prostitution and pornography like *double anal, doggy* and *fisting*. It must be noticed that people involved in pornography resort to explicit euphemism more frequently than those outside it. In fact, characters connected with pornographic movies give alternative denominations for their job such as *the industry*, as seen in the following speech of an actress in which she avoids a direct reference to her occupation:

*Porn* is a disgusting little word, isn't it? It's the most disgusting single thing in the whole phenomenon. *Porno's* nothing like so bad. In the industry, we call it the industry. That's what you call it when you are in it. (235)

Similarly, sexual variants related to pornography and prostitution are designated by means of explicit euphemisms like *do Gay*, *Facial*, *straight gay* and the already mentioned *double anal* and *fisting*. This preference for euphemistic alternatives can be seen in the following dialogue in which the dysphemistic terms used by the journalist Clint Smoker (*suck off*, *arse*, *shoot*, *tits*) differ from the explicit euphemistic options (*spend* 'ejaculate' and *breasts*) used by Dork Bogarde, an actor in pornographic films:

'She sucked you off underneath a pyramid and then you had her up the arse in an helium balloon. Then you landed on Everest and shot all over her tits'.

'I spent on her breasts? That's so —*passé*. You'd think I'd remember that'. (274)

However, not all sex-related euphemisms encountered in *Yellow Dog* are explicit. A good example is the euphemism used to allude to incest and paedophilia. As shown in Table 1, these taboos are only the source of four explicit euphemistic substitutes (*episode of incest*, *paedophile*, *paedophilia* and *sexualise one's relationship with one's daughter*), since Amis tends to use more indirect and vague lexical options, that is, more orthodox euphemistic alternatives with, at least in theory, a more effective mitigating power, to cope with them. Hence the periphrastic phrase *love of the wrong kind* (306) and the generic terms *stuff* (226), *sin* (242) and *taboo* (335). In any case, these euphemisms and others equally related to incestuous sexual practices like *do one's work* (216) and *mess with* (225) do not actually achieve a real mitigation of the taboo. On the contrary, Amis seems to emphasize the supposedly erotic overtones of this taboo with phrases such as *size zero* (242) and *preliminary form of her breasts* (248) concerning his five-year-old daughter. In this regard, euphemism is at the writer's disposal to take pleasure in incestuous desires, something considered by certain critics as "stomach-aching" (O'Connor 2003). From the above examples, it can be deduced that certain taboos are so distasteful that euphemistic disguise is totally unable to mitigate them.

## 5. Concluding remarks

The research carried out in this paper supports the idea that the traditional concept of euphemism should be extended to other modes of palliative substitutions, since nowadays the escape from the vulgar word is by no means limited to implicit, vague or indirect references, as the traditional concept of euphemism claimed. Indeed, taking as an example Martin Amis's *Yellow Dog*, I have argued that an unambiguous and undeviating reference to sexual topics stands out in today's fiction as a consequence of the relaxation of taboos against obscenity in Western societies. In fact, sexual taboos have lost much of their former interdictive strength, which obviously affects the nature of sexual euphemism in a significant way.

Consequently I have gone on to propose the category of explicit euphemism to account for a modality of euphemistic substitution which presents distinct patterns that greatly differ from the traditional view of euphemism: direct reference to the taboo without any suspension of its connotations, lexicalized metaphorical language, low mitigating capacity, contextual relevance and communicative efficiency. This particular euphemistic category meets the writer's need to avoid the coarse word rather than the taboo itself in approximately 37% of the total cases of sexual euphemism recorded in Amis's novel. In fact, with certain exceptions concerning the taboos of incest and paedophilia, an explicit reference to the taboo is given a free hand in the novel dealt with in the present paper.

In this sense, today's literary discourse could be thought to be uneuphemistic. Nothing further from the truth. Indirect and vague euphemistic substitutions<sup>11</sup> coexist with explicit euphemism, which maintains, despite its particular nature, the main euphemistic function, that of replacing linguistic taboos. Therefore, the treatment of sexual taboos in contemporary fiction does not imply, as Epstein (1985: 70) argues, the defeat of euphemism. The heart of the matter is that allusion to certain realities is nowadays acceptable in contexts where the coarse lexical equivalent, especially the so called 'four-letter words', may not be. And this is where Amis resorts to explicit euphemism as a kind of linguistic safeguard.

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What emerges from this piece of research is that the euphemistic reference to certain topics contaminated by sexual taboos is, paradoxically, a proof of the writer's intention to trigger off the realities that euphemism is meant to tone down. Explicit euphemism is thus, from this viewpoint, two-dimensional and, in a sense, contradictory by nature. In this respect, there is a question which remains unanswered: does explicit euphemism involve offence? In answering this question, it must be noted that concerning explicit euphemism it is not easy to distinguish euphemism from dysphemism. Furthermore, not all explicit euphemistic alternatives for sexual issues obviously display the patterns mentioned above in the same degree; in fact, some of them present a greater degree of euphemistic power than others.<sup>12</sup> This seems hardly surprising, given that, after all, the discursive value of euphemism ultimately depends on pragmatic considerations which have not been dealt with in depth here (see Crespo Fernández 2007: 119-143 for details). Thus, it is necessary to focus on the communicative context and the participants involved in the pragmatic setting to check to what extent terms such as *anal*, *sodomy* or *touch* would be felt as offensive or simply as an acceptable way of avoiding taboo words deemed unfit for normal linguistic usage. In any case, I strongly believe that, uncertain as the category of explicit euphemism may seem, it constitutes a response to the current widespread practice of referring to sex-related taboo topics while evading startingly coarse violations of these taboos, and obviously reflects the profusion of bawdy language in modern times.

## Glossary of explicit euphemism in *Yellow Dog*

The following glossary is a lexicographic appendix of the research presented in the preceding pages. This glossary lists the explicit euphemistic items mentioned in the paper and others also encountered in *Yellow Dog*. However, this glossary can make no claim to being complete or objective, given the unpredictable nature of a phenomenon found in actual language use and, as such, dependent on pragmatic variables and on the perspective adopted by the researcher, inevitably subjective. Despite this, I believe that the list below is representative enough of how the phenomenon takes place in contemporary literary language.

Each headword in bold type is followed, rather by its definition in standard English, by the sense that the euphemistic substitute acquires in its communicative context, together with the number of times that the substitute has been found in novel, which provides information regarding the lexical frequency of each explicit euphemistic alternative. In order to allow the reader to form an idea of how the word is used, each entry is supported with the phraseological context in which it appears in the novel.

**act of love.** Coition. (2)

The act of love was becoming not distasteful, not unnecessary, but only one of a series of pleasures. (103)

**anal.** Anal coition. (3)

One director said, "With anal, the actress's personality comes out." (269)

**anal 6** (*anal sex*). Coition consisting in anal penetration. (1)

[...] u have asked for my views on anal 6 and related?s (159)

**arousal.** Sexual excitation. (1)

Some said that Potentium was bullshit too: it affronted the market forces having to do with the reality of arousal. (273)

**arouse.** To excite sexually. (4)

The spectacle aroused him-but not as much as the sound of He's feet [...] all coming closer. (120)

**bosoms.** The female breasts. (1)

They're very unhappy people and they look it. [...] Keep the bosoms within reasonable

bounds: forty-four triple-F would do as a benchmark. (24)

**breasts.** The female breasts. (8)

Clint steadied his dark glasses and resumed his attempt to stare out at Karla's breasts. (269)

**bust.** The female breasts. (2)

The bust. They seem fake. They seem fake because there's no asymmetry. (240)

**carnal knowledge.** Coition. (1)

Both were exquisitely intimate; and both relied on carnal knowledge. (128)

**chest.** The female breasts. (1)

He had been aiming for her chest (not her lower abdomen, as negotiated). (107)

**concubine.** A prostitute. (2)

And in came He Zizhen, greatgranddaughter of concubines. Love bade her welcome. (21)

**cunnilingus.** Oral stimulation of female genitals. (2)

as 4 cunnilingus, that's strictly verbo 10. (160)

**c\*\*ts.** *Cunts.* (1)

He's got the gall to tell us there was 'no provocation'.  
When the bird was wearing *a school uniform*.  
What are we, c\*\*ts? (311)

**doggy.** Vaginal penetration from the rear. (1)

Xan was supposed to exchange some words with Charisma Trixxx and then watch her perform with Sir Dork Bogarde (as follows: 'Blow. Doggy. Cowgirl. Reverse Cowgirl. Facial'). (288)

**do Gay.** To coit anally. (1)

Dork turned to Hick (it was established earlier that Hick had been known to do Gay). (274)

**double anal.** A variant of anal sex. (1)

For instance, you'd have to be a bit gay to do a double anal. Don't you think? (304)

**ejaculation.** The ejection of semen. (3)

It was meant to increase the bulk of your ejaculations 'to porno proportions', according to the literature. (107)

**ejection.** The ejaculation of semen. (1)

And why was he torturing bullying Russia, why was he torturing her with the sex weapon? [...] to punish himself, himself, and bring about his own ejection? (142)

**encounter.** Coition. (1)

He there-after relied on escort girls, entertained in various London hotels; and even these encounters were far from frictionless. (29)

**episode of incest.** Incestuous sexual practice. (1)

Marriage is a sibling relationship-marked by occasional and rather regrettable, episodes of incest. (8)

**erotic employment.** A job as an actor or actress in pornographic movies. (1)

There were teenage passengers on board, male and female, who couldn't be possibly destined for erotic employment. (286)

**erotic play.** Sexual excitation before coition. (1)

The faculties of touch, taste, smell and sight [...] could be reasonably well served in erotic play. (120)

**escort girl.** Prostitute. (1)

He there-after relied on escort girls, entertained in various London hotels [...]. (29)

**Facial.** Sexual practice consisting in ejaculating on the face. (1)

*The Facial is there, always, because the customer wants it to be there. What do men want? They want the Facial.* (289)

**fell8tio** (*fellatio*). Oral stimulation of the penis. (1)

rule: never kiss your man after fell8tio. (160)

**female underwear.** Underclothing. (2)

Despite the unsettling discoveries in the vacated bed-sitting-room (the stolen property, the forged passports and pension-books, the fantastic cache of the female underwear [...]). (127)

**fisting.** Sexual practice consisting in inserting the fist in the anus. (1)

Is there anything you wouldn't do? As an actress. Fisting and pissing and that? (271)

**flux.** Seminal fluid. (1)

And now there are hairs all over it, and some... disgusting flux or other. (82)

**foreplay.** Sexual excitation before coition. (2)

'Take your ring off for God's sake,' she said, after a full minute of foreplay. (168)

**fornication.** Coition. (2)

In these surroundings, he felt, languid and methodical fornication would not seem particularly daring. (233)

**f\*\*k.** *Fuck.* (3)

You f\*\*ked that one up. (189)

**f\*\*king.** *Fucking.* (3)

I fu\*\*king loved it! (267)

**genitalia.** Male sexual organs. (1)

You have 125 new messages. About 120 of them would be from commercial concerns: invitations to Clint to shower money on his genitalia. (159)

**get someone into bed.** To copulate. (1)

After a thirty-page chase the narrator finally gets Eve into bed. (234)

**get warm.** To stimulate sexually. (1)

The thing had a 'pleasure meter' on it, which showed you when you were getting warm. (207)

**go to bed.** To copulate. (1)

Xan wanted to go to bed with his wife for two good reasons: she was his ideal and she was there. (139)

**handjob.** A male masturbation. (1)

To say that, you have to say that masturbation has become respectable. And that's what they're saying. "Wanking's cool," I read the other day. "Handjobs are brilliant." (237)

**hard.** Erect (relative to penis). (1)

As she removed her clothes He caressed him with them, and then with what the clothes contained. He touched him. He touched He. He was hard. (22)

**have sex.** To copulate. (2)

For three years the only sex I had was the sex I had on camera. (235)

**have 6** (*have sex*). To copulate. (1)

in bed, while we're having 6, he moans at me to scream. (75)

**in bed.** During coition. (2)

In bed, of course, the eternal battle was to make them feel it: to transform them with your strength. (248)

**intimacy.** Sexual encounter. (1)

Until you do that, and it *is* what you're going to do, you and I can have only one kind of intimacy. (209)

**intimate.** Sexually intimate. (1)

Both were exquisitely intimate; and both relied on carnal knowledge. (128)

**male member.** The penis. (1)

[...] the Lark had put together a playful piece about *the Guinness Book of Records* and the new category saluting the biggest ever, or longest ever, male member. (70)

**male-potency.** Erection of the penis. (1)

Sir, Potentium. A male-potency drug. Tested and patented and freely available. (84)

**manly parts.** Penis and testicles. (1)

He cannot speak, and as you see, his manly parts are right and comely, he cannot spend. (293)

**masturbation.** Self-stimulation of the genitals. (1)

[...] we are now faced with the legal question whether our photocaptions constitute a uh,... "an incitement to masturbation". (171)

**menpleaser.** A prostitute. (1)

He thought too of the menpleasers of twenty-five years ago, their stockings, garterbelts, cleavages, perfumes. (7)

**nipples.** Small prominences in which the woman's breasts terminate. (1)

This prompted a sexual thought, one unmoderated by the simultaneous reminder

that large nipples would facilitate the business of lactation. (63)

**onanistic.** Relative to masturbation. (1)

They came from the world of onanistic longing- and coarse sentimentality, and impotent sadism. (152)

**one-night stand.** A casual sexual encounter. (1)

[...] the rest consisted of girls [...] chronicling their one-night stands with famous footballers. (25)

**oral 6 (oral sex).** Oral stimulation of male or female genitals. (1)

I'm very happy to perform oral 6 any time. (160)

**organ.** The penis. (1)

Clint had found it a low moment, to be sure, when Dimity told him to regard his organ as a middle finger without the nail. (207)

**orgasm.** Sexual ecstasy. (3)

'What's that doing there?' [...] 'It helps me have an orgasm'... (7)

**paedophile.** A person addicted to sex with children. (1)

It's an interesting story. And it ties with our Death to Paedophiles Campaign. (26)

**paedophilia.** Addiction to sex with children. (1)

The essential self-policing has to do with two areas, male-female violence and paedophilia. (269)

**passive male.** A male homosexual who is sexually penetrated in coition. (1)

The fact remained that the bed he spent so much time trying not to think about had an occupant, and that occupant had a passive male. (84)

**penis.** The male sexual organ. (2)

The other half offered penis —enlargement strategies— and Clint had tried them all. (169)

**phallus.** The penis. (2)

When the strap-on phallus was conspiratorially produced [...] Brendan felt an abject stirring, a sick twitch, between his legs. (257)

**rectum.** The anus. (1)

'How's your father, love?'  
'decim8ted. all the way from caecum 2 rectum.' (326)

**semen.** The sperm. (1)

What, may I ask, is lovepiss?  
Semen, Chief.  
Oh. Oh. I thought our style was "manjuice". (77)

**6 (sex).** Coition. (1)

he still wants 6 every nite, but i've got a new str@agem: not washing. (172)

**sex-act.** Coition. (1)

While he slept and turned he kept remembering the final minutes of the sex-act he had witnessed on Dolorosa Drive. (297)

**sex-life.** Physical capacity to copulate. (1)

The worst thing, they say, is what it does to your sex-life. (65)

**sex weapon.** Penis. (1)

And why was he torturing bullying Russia, why was he torturing her with the sex weapon? (142)

**sexual intercourse.** Coition. (1)

By the time he reached his twentieth year, the Prince of Wales, as he then was, showed no more interest in sexual intercourse than he showed in polo or parachuting. (79-80)

**sexualise one's relationship with one's daughter.** To commit incest. (1)

You know, if you wanted to sexualise your relationship with your daughter, she'd go along with it. What else can she do? (244)



**sleep with.** To copulate. (2)

Though press and public assumed that he was sleeping with at least one or two of the young beauties he frequently squired, Henry was faithful for the next five years. (80)

**sodomy.** Anal sex. (1)

Immediately there was an overwhelming emphasis on male-female sodomy. (269)

**space between her legs.** The female genitals. (1)

[...] it was in the space between her legs, in this triangular absence (the shape of a capital *y*), that her gravity-centre lay... (66)

**spend.** To ejaculate. (2)

I spent on her breasts? That's so *passé*. You'd think I'd remember that. (274)

**spend the night.** To copulate. (1)

He even believed that he would be spending the night with Russia on this day: the day of the martyr Valentine. (333)

**stimulation.** Sexual excitation. (1)

Dr. Gandhi had taken due note of Russia's appearance, and derived some doctorly stimulation from it. (62)

**straight gay.** Anal sex. (1)

Uh, porno's quite gay. And we mean unacknowledged-gay, don't we. Not straight gay. (304)

**stripclub.** A night club where erotic shows are performed. (1)

Was he the one that went to a strip-club? (161)

**the intima.** The female genitals. (1)

Her subtle eyes pleadingly appraised him, then widened; [...] And so his daubed fingertip sought the intima. (248)

**thing between his legs.** The penis. (3)

[...] the thing between his legs was a harsh concentration of gristle. (298)

**touch.** To fondle in order to get sexual pleasure. By extension, to copulate. (1)

I made you, so I can touch you, your first child should be your dad's. (236)

**verbal 4play** (*verbal foreplay*). Verbal erotic stimulation. (1)

I'd cheer u up with some verbal 4play. (159)

**vulva.** The female genitals. (2)

He could now see the preliminary form of her breasts through her shirt; then the stomach still infantilely outthrust; and the vulva, like a long-hand *m*, but all abraded and enflamed [...]. (247)

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>. In the Victorian novel *Hard Times* the presence of sex is indeed very limited: only 22 sexual references disguised under a very vague and indirect euphemistic mitigation despite the fact that affective matters play an important role in the novel (Crespo Fernández 2005: 385-386).

<sup>2</sup>. Burgen (1996: 20-21) mentions two cases from the 1990s which evocate Victorian times in sexual matters. First, an advertisement was surprisingly banned in the London underground for including the term *vagina*. Second, American Online, one of the most renowned sales companies on the

Internet, censored the word *breasts* in an attempt to eliminate obscene words from the web.

<sup>3</sup>. Martin Amis's web-page, maintained by James Diedrick, offers different reactions to and reviews of the novel that appeared in publications such as *The Guardian*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Telegraph* or *The Independent*.

<sup>4</sup>. From this perspective, cognitive conceptualization of abstract concepts ('sex' in our case) fulfils a euphemistic function insofar as a particular source domain (e.g. 'food') is used to mitigate the taboo target domain in cases like "I did enjoy a delicious meal". In this example, *meal* is figuratively interpreted in terms of the conceptual mapping TO COPULATE IS TO EAT.

<sup>5</sup>. Hereafter, terms and phrases not collected in the appendix and quotations excerpted from *Yellow Dog* will be followed by the page number in brackets.

<sup>6</sup>. Following Luchtenberg (cited in Abrantes 2005: 93-95), euphemism fulfils two main functions, that of *concealing* (the taboo topic is deliberately avoided) and that of *veiling* (the forbidden subject is manipulated in such a way that it only presents a distorted segment of it). I understand that explicit euphemisms only fulfil the function of concealing not the taboo concept, but the coarse word.

<sup>7</sup>. Apart from lexicalized euphemisms, Chamizo Domínguez and Sánchez Benedito (2000: 68-70) distinguish two more types: *semilexicalized* (the substitute is included in a conceptual domain traditionally tied to the taboo) and *creative euphemisms* (the euphemistic item is the result of a novel association with the taboo, only accessible in its phraseological context). For Abrantes (2005), lexicalized and creative

euphemisms roughly correspond with *conventional* and *official* euphemisms. In the same vein, Crespo Fernández (2006a: 32-34) proposed a typology of metaphorical euphemism and established four types, namely *explicit*, *conventional*, *novel* and *artful* euphemisms.

<sup>8</sup>. Personal differences based on sex have been separated from the rest of the cases of sexual euphemism since in the phraseological context of the novel they arise as a mode of avoiding personal discrimination rather than as a direct mitigation of sexual realities.

<sup>9</sup>. In this domain I include euphemisms from three areas: sexual life (*erotic life*, 66), love encounters (*date*, 107) and sexual abstinence (*loss of love*, 69).

<sup>10</sup>. Though the morphology of these formations is not related to euphemistic factors, the sexual referents to which these lexical units undoubtedly refer reveal the explicit nature of sexual euphemism in *Yellow Dog*.

<sup>11</sup>. Amis employs two euphemistic substitutes for the taboo 'copulate' which are diametrically opposed to explicit euphemism: *submit to a body of moving water* (39) and *let the waves do it* (39). These are cases of *artful euphemism*, the modality of verbal mitigation which presents a connotative and poetic value. Concerning artful euphemism, see Allan and Burridge (1991: 210-220) and Crespo Fernández (2006b: 75-77).

<sup>12</sup>. As an anonymous referee correctly observes, there seem to exist degrees of euphemistic power in explicit euphemism. For instance, concerning the taboo of 'coition', *encounter* is more toned-down than *act of love*, which palliates the taboo more effectively than *carnal knowledge*, which is, in turn, less strong than *fornication*.

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