A circumlocution is a roundabout expression used when dealing about a disagreeable idea. A euphemism is a device, usually consisting of a single word, giving a more attractive appearance to an objectionable idea. The most obvious examples of circumlocution and euphemism are expressions used to soften the idea of death (pass away, enter into rest, expire, be deceased --kick the bucket, turn in one's checks, give up the ghost); toilet (rest room, powder room); unpleasant truths relating to diseases (mental illness, rest home, malignancy, lung affliction); unpleasant facts of life (expectorate for spit, plant food for manure, country home for poor house, intemperance for drunkenness, infidelity for adultery, visually handicapped for blind).

Euphemisms are also commonly used in referring to occupations either to conceal a definite unpleasantness or to improve social status. Thus, foremen, bookkeepers, office-girls, rat-catchers, undertakers, pawnbrokers, shoemakers, press-agents, hired girls, or janitors have become respectively, supervisory personnel, accountants, secretaries (receptionists), exterminators, morticians (funeral directors), proprietors of loan offices, shoe-rebuilders, public relations counselors, domestics, and custodians. Examples of euphemisms used to upgrade social status are: director of pupil personnel (head truant officer), sales/customers' representatives/sales engineers (salesman).

The following is a list of phrases that teachers in a New York City junior high school use to convey their complaints about their pupils to the parents without causing offense.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Awkward and clumsy</td>
<td>Appears to have difficulty with motor control and muscular coordination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does all right if pushed</td>
<td>Accomplishes tasks when interest is frequently stimulated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too free with fists</td>
<td>Resorts to physical means of winning his points or attracting attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could stand more baths, is dirty, has bad odor</td>
<td>Needs guidance in development of good habits of hygiene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lies</td>
<td>Shows difficulty in distinguishing between imaginary and factual material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steals</td>
<td>Needs help in learning to respect the property rights of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheats</td>
<td>Needs help in learning to adhere to rules and standards of fair play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insolent</td>
<td>Needs guidance in learning to express himself respectfully</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lazy</td>
<td>Needs ample supervision in order to work well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rude</td>
<td>Needs to develop a respectful attitude toward others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selfish</td>
<td>Needs help in learning to enjoy sharing with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coarse</td>
<td>Needs assistance in developing social refinement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noisy</td>
<td>Needs to develop quieter habits of communication</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Circumlocutions and euphemisms are useful to help ease social relationships where tact and courtesy are required instead of bluntness. On
the other hand, the sacrifice of directness is a considerable price to pay for
delicacy. Roundabout expressions should be used only when there is a clear
practical reason for using them instead of their more direct equivalents.

The word *cliché* is French, meaning stereotype—a metal plate cast
from a page of type—a term used in printing. The stereotype enables the
printer to make more copies without having to reset all the type each time.
In English usage cliche means a ready-cast or stereotyped expression—a
pre-fabricated phrase—which saves a writer or speaker the trouble of
trying to find a new way of saying something.

Insofar as it economizes on time and effort, the cliche is undoubtedly
efficient. But good writing must be also effective, which means it must
impress readers with the sincerity of the writer. It must be fresh, that is, it
must look like it is written for a particular occasion. One who uses cliches is
writing mechanically. The willful or ignorant use of trite language seems
to imply that the writer is intellectually as well as verbally imitative.
However, it does not mean that good writers never use cliches; if they use
them at all, they use them with the utmost caution. In informal
conversation especially, cliches are almost indispensable.

How can we tell when an expression becomes cliche? A practical test
is: if you can accurately anticipate what a speaker is going to say next, he is
obviously using cliches. For example, at a funeral you may hear “We are
gathered here today to mourn (the untimely death) of our beloved
daughter. Words are inadequate (to express the grief that is in our hearts).”
The words in parentheses are what you expect the speaker to be saying and
thus are cliches.

Many familiar cliches are figures of speech. If the reader has
become so accustomed to a figure of speech to the point that it no longer
stimulates his imagination, then it is no different from a nonfigurative
expression. Many such images which are clever and appropriate at first
have become almost lifeless like the following metaphors and similes:

- common as dirt, old as hills, sell like hot cakes, sleep like a log; a bolt from the blue, variety is the spice of life, point the finger of suspicion....

One variety of cliches comes from the desire to suggest a resemblance between some aspect of man's behavior and that of animals. The following excerpt comes from a leaflet issued periodically by the Columbia University Press and we can see that the missing element may be automatically supplied in a cliche.

"Man," says The Columbia Encyclopedia, "is distinguished from other animals by his brain and his hands." But there the difference would seem to end because he is chicken-livered, lion-hearted, pigeon-toed. He is treacherous as a snake, sly as a fox, busy as a . . . . . . slippery as an . . . . . . industrious as an ant, blind as a bat, faithful as a dog, gentle as a lamb. He has clammy hands, the ferocity of the tiger, the manners of a pig, the purpose of a jellyfish. He gets drunk as an owl. He roars like a . . . . . . he coos like a dove. He is still as a mouse; he hops around like a sparrow. He works like a horse. He is led like a sheep. He can fly like a bird, run like a deer, drink like a . . . . . . swim like a duck. He is nervous as a cat. He sticks his head in the sand like an . . . . . . He acts like a dog in the manger. He is coltish and kittenish, and stubborn as a . . . . . . He plays possum. He gets hungry as a bear, and wolfs his food. He has the memory of an elephant. He is easily cowed. He gets thirsty as a camel. He is as strong as an . . . . . . He has a catlike walk, and a mousy manner. He parrots everything he hears. He acts like a puppy, and is as playful as a kitten. He struts like a rooster, and as vain as a peacock. He is as happy as a . . . . . . and as sad as an owl. He has a whale of an appetite. He has a beak for a nose, and
arms like an ape. He has the eyes of a . . . . and the neck of a bull. He is as slow as a tortoise. He chatters like a magpie. He has raven hair and the shoulders of a buffalo. He’s as dumb as an ox--he is even as big as an ox. He’s a worm. His . . . . . is cooked. He’s crazy as a bedbug (or fox or coot). He’s a rat. He’s a louse. Of course, he is also as cool as cucumber, fresh as a . . . . . red as a beet, etc.--But The Columbia Encyclopedia doesn’t suggest that he differs in any way from vegetables and other flora, so we won’t go into that.

Another category of cliches insists upon associating a particular descriptive adjective with a given noun: whirlwind courtship, stony silence, crushing defeat, rocketing costs. Other common types of cliches are verb and noun phrases. Verb phrases include to live to a ripe old age, to let bygones be bygones, to upset the applecart, to withstand the test of time. Noun phrases that have been worn out include ace up his sleeve, the patter of rain, a diamond in the rough, the fly in the ointment.

Cliches should be avoided most in descriptive and narrative writings since their success depend on the freshness and exactness with which the writer communicates his expressions to the reader. A writer who uses words that someone else has used before in his work does not present any new experience. We cannot see things from any new angle or receive a fresh interpretation of their meaning. A writer who depends upon cliches is not being creative.

Many cliches are derived from books that have great influence on the common speech. To kill the fatted calf, the straw that breaks the camel’s back, all come from the Bible even though the original Biblical connotations may have been forgotten. It is unfortunate that many of the finest things that have been said in the world like some of the most moving
poems and political documents have become hackneyed through constant use.

Exercise 1 Euphemism and Circumlocution

Point out the euphemism or circumlocution in each of the following pairs of words.

- grease job/lubrication service
- foundation garment/corset
- field underwriter/insurance salesman
- false teeth/denture
- house trailer/mobile home
- automatic coin machine/juke box
- slum clearance/urban renewal
- principal/headmaster
- toothpaste/denticide
- table service man/bus boy
- dishwasher/utensil maintenance man
- sub foreman/group leader
- telephone answerer/night hostess (in a girls’ dormitory)
- route salesman/milkman
- service salesman/gas station attendant
- installment plan/deferred payment
- laying off/termination of employment
- artificial/simulated (material)
- door-to-door canvasser/brush salesman
- clerk/sales person
Exercise 2

Slang often has euphemistic intent (*bump off* for *kill*, *whopper* for *lie*). How many of the following terms are euphemistic slang? How many are euphemisms without being slang?

- nut house
- madhouse
- booby hatch
- insane asylum
- private sanitarium
- mental hospital
- institution for the treatment of nervous diseases
- loony bin
- lunatic asylum
- retreat

Exercise 3

**a. Why** is the word *institute* used so often to designate establishments devoted neither to education nor to research, as in *American Iron and Steel Institute*?

**b. Why** do some large firms, including department stores, refer to their employees as *associates*?

**c. Make a list of modern euphemistic synonyms for the old-fashioned saloon.**

**d. “And now, a brief message from our sponsor.” Why brief message, rather than advertisement or commercial?**
e. Why is the word **family** frequently used in the advertisements of great corporations, when referring to their employees or to the subsidiary companies?

Exercise 4 Cliches

Fill in the blanks:

1. First and ___________, in my search I will leave no stone _____.
   It will be a labor of ___________.

2. By prompt action she was **f r o m t h e j a w s o f** ___________; otherwise she would have gone to a watery ___________.

3. last but not ___________, to make a long story ___________, he is caught between the ___________ and the deep blue sea. Such is ___________.

4. He did the land office **t h e f i r s t m o n t h t h a t h e w a s o p e n**, but the wear and ___________ on his health was too great. So he took a vacation in Florida, saying that the change would either ___________ or cure him. Underneath, though, one could detect that he was whistling in the ___________

5. As sure as ___________ and taxes.
   Packed in tight as ___________.
   Sharp as ___________.
   Quick as ___________.
   Hard as ___________.
   silent as ___________.
   stick out as ___________.
   **Dull as** ___________.
   Innocent ___________.
   **Mad as** ___________.

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