Is the word “euphemism” a euphemism?

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The word euphemism derives from the Greek eu, good, and phemos, speaking, and it labels the verbal camouflage we use to hide nasty realities. Some common examples of euphemism are: pass away for die and make love for copulate. My favorites are the American military-term pacification mission (the napalming of peasant villages) and embryo reduction procedure (abortion). My favourite Vancouver euphemism is teasing the weasel (male masturbation).

Other, more specific examples of political euphemism are: the underprivileged (the poor), working people (unionized labour), special needs (handicapped), and - a golden oldie - liquidate (murder). Though the Nazis were normally quite upfront about murder, even they felt compelled to say final solution when referring to the extermination of the Jews.

The drawback of euphemism is that no matter what you call the nasty thing, the thing (e.g. death) remains nasty and eventually the euphemism becomes as offensive as the word it replaced. This means that a new word must be found. Linguists call this phenomenon deterioration, and this is a recurring problem in the funeral business.

Formerly, those who put you under ground were called undertakers, but when that became offensive they renamed themselves morticians (a label proposed in 1895 by Embalmer's Monthly). Today, if you walk your fingers through the Yellow-pages, you won't find the word mortician; you will, instead, find funeral directors and their "caring, professionally-trained staff." You will also find the phrase memorial centre, which seems to be the future euphemistic replacement for funeral home.

Politicians are masters of euphemism. According to George Orwell, the reason for this is that: "In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible ... thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question begging, and sheer cloudy vagueness." This is why, for example, when Conservatives want to cut social welfare, they speak of fiscal restraint and responsible government, and when
Socialists want to raise taxes they speak of social justice.

I once worked for a Canadian Member of Parliament, so I got first-hand exposure to the powerful urge to euphemize and obfuscate. Within months of taking office, I learned that every time you spoke clearly about an issue, you would offend someone and perhaps lose a vote. Sometimes we would get a letter from a former supporter saying just that. We never got letters from former non-supporters saying that they would start voting for us because of something my boss said.

As the real goal of the majority of democratic politicians is to get re-elected, my boss decided to play it safe and never again say anything that might offend anybody. He became extremely good at speaking about controversial issues and saying absolutely nothing that would offend anybody, while at the same time sounding as if he were seriously dealing with an issue. Watching him speak was like watching someone spray-paint during a windstorm.

Here are some MooT questions that pertain to euphemism:

1. Nixon’s press secretary, Ron Ziegler, called them “inoperative statements.” What do English speakers call them?
2. Spell the term that feminists coined to remove the “man” from “woman.”
3. What large land-mass’s name is a euphemism?
4. According to the Ontario Department of Education, how does a sexist say “synthetic”?
Answers

1. **Lies** - During Watergate, the Nixon administration was caught telling so many lies that it had to call a press conference to own up to them. Nixon’s press secretary Ron Ziegler - who was at that time to euphemism what Bobby Orr was to hockey - handled it by bluntly informing the Press Corps that all previous administration statements regarding the Watergate scandal were, henceforth, “inoperative.”

2. **Wimmin** - In Old English the word **man** meant "person"; thus, the word woman comes from **wifman**, wife person; similarly, males were called **woepmen**, weapon person's.

3. **Greenland** - Eric the Red (the primordial Real-Estate developer) named the ice-bound island **Greenland** to attract settlers.

4. **Man-made** - A 1979 report commissioned by the Ontario Department of Education recommended that "sexist" terms, such as **man-made** and **mankind**, be replaced in all Ontario curricula by "non-sexist" terms, such as **synthetic** and **humanity**.

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