



**HAL**  
open science

# Double whammy! The dysphemistic euphemism implied in "unVables" such as "unmentionables, unprintables, undesirables"

Chris Chris A. Smith

## ► To cite this version:

Chris Chris A. Smith. Double whammy! The dysphemistic euphemism implied in "unVables" such as "unmentionables, unprintables, undesirables". *Lexis. Journal in English Lexicology*, 2012, Euphemism as a Word-Formation Process, 7, pp.121-143. 10.4000/lexis.378 . hal-02144427

**HAL Id: hal-02144427**

**<https://hal.science/hal-02144427v1>**

Submitted on 30 May 2019

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## Double whammy! The dysphemistic euphemism implied in *unVables* such as *unmentionables*, *unprintables*, *undesirables*

Chris Smith

---



**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/lexis/378>

DOI: 10.4000/lexis.378

ISSN: 1951-6215

**Publisher**

Université Jean Moulin - Lyon 3

**Electronic reference**

Chris Smith, « Double whammy! The dysphemistic euphemism implied in *unVables* such as *unmentionables*, *unprintables*, *undesirables* », *Lexis* [Online], 7 | 2012, Online since 25 June 2012, connection on 21 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/lexis/378> ; DOI : 10.4000/lexis.378

---



Lexis is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

## **Double whammy! The dysphemistic euphemism implied in *unVables* such as *unmentionables*, *unprintables*, *undesirables***

Chris Smith<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

The starting point for this paper is the realization that the classic euphemism *unmentionables* rests upon three word formation processes, which have each been proven to be individually compatible with euphemistic effect. Consider the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* entry for the plural noun *unmentionable* (1823): "b) n. pl. Trousers. (Cf. *inexpressible* n. 2) Also, underpants, and (chiefly joc.) underwear, esp. women's. (1823); - c) n. A person or thing not to be mentioned (by name). Chiefly pl. (1928)". The existence of a whole class of euphemistic *unVables* built on the same model, such as *unprintables* (*OED*, first occurrence 1860 in the sense of trousers), *untouchables* (lexicalized 1909 in the sense of "Indian underclass"), *unspeakables* (lexicalized, 1823 in the sense of "ineffable being"), has motivated research into the role of A>N conversion, metonymy and the *unVable* double affixation on the final connotations of the expression. The purpose of the paper is to present a case study of *unVables*: by producing a list of attested *unVables*, I investigate the correlation between lexical complexity and lexical creativity and euphemism. The data collected shows that, despite no longer being lexicalized, the *unVables* metonyms continue to be used in a context of lexical expressiveness. The paper takes the view that the position of *unVables* on the positive end of the X-phemism pole has shifted over time to metalinguistically produce a dysphemistic effect. This shift can partly be justified by changing perceptions of taboo areas, but also, crucially, to the inherent deontic shift of the *unVable* derivative. Ultimately, the use of *unVables* today tends to lay focus on the self-censure at the heart of the expression, thus creating a contrast between the minimizing features of euphemism and the maximizing features of a focusing process.

**Keywords:** A>N conversion – metonymy – X-phemism pole – lexical creativity – metalinguistic dysphemism – deontic modality

---

<sup>1</sup> MCF à l'Université de Caen, membre du CRISCO, EA 4255: [unclbungaria@yahoo.com](mailto:unclbungaria@yahoo.com)

## Foreword

Expressions such as *unmentionables* (first occurrence in 1823 denoting undergarments) are notoriously euphemistic, as indicated in *OED*. Allan and Burrige [2006: 238] cite *inexpressibles*, *unmentionables* and *unhintables* as Victorian euphemisms for legs, trousers and underclothing respectively. *Unmentionables* is one of the most common euphemistic expressions around, and has even been appeared in the title of several books, such as Lawrence [1973] and Keyes [2010]. Nevertheless, to my knowledge, there hasn't been any extensive study into the relationship between this specific word morphology and euphemism. Much recent research into euphemism has been discourse-oriented, showing that a wide variety of lexical sets exists across a number of languages for taboo topics, as illustrated by, for instance, the many euphemistic synonyms for underclothes, including *smalls*, *scanties*, *unmentionables*, *unwhisperables*, and so forth. Allan and Burrige [2006: 243] underscore three main prolific taboo areas, all relating to the basic human condition:

the vocabulary for bodily effluvia, sex and tabooed body parts manifests significantly more synonymy than one encounters anywhere else in the English lexicon; there are literally thousand of X-phemisms<sup>2</sup>.

Rather than adding to the many interesting onomasiological forays into euphemism in discourse (medicalese, legalese, journalese), this paper takes a semasiological approach to the question of euphemism. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the X-phemistic behaviour of negative deverbal adjective>noun conversions. It is widely accepted that euphemism is not exclusively associated with one specific word formation process. Yet, it has been shown to be compatible with an impressive array of linguistic strategies, including affixation, metonymy and conversion (Bonhomme [2006: 160], Tournier 2007), negation (Tournier 2007) and hyperonymy or supercategorization (Wierzbicka 1988), as well as truncation and circumlocution (Allan 2006, Tournier 2007).

Euphemisms are created by circumlocution, phonological modification, extending the meaning of a near-synonym (thus reintroducing rarely used words into the basic vocabulary), borrowing from another language, or even by coining a new word. Allan [2006: 127-128]

Without calling into question the historically euphemistic effect of such expressions as *unmentionables*, *undesirables*, *unprintables*, *untouchables*, this paper examines the dysphemistic potential of the *unVable* model in contemporary English. Allan and Burrige [2006] suggest that euphemism is by definition an alternative choice of expression, possibly intentional or conventional, over a neutral orthophemism (or 'straight talking' in Allan and Burrige [2006: 1]<sup>3</sup>), thus placing euphemism at the centre of affective or modalized communication. The aim is to determine how the euphemism-dysphemism poles can become reversed when the intentions behind the use of an expression are at odds with the connotations of the expression.

---

<sup>2</sup> In Allan and Burrige [2006] 'X-phemism' is used to refer to the combined set of alternative expressions which range from euphemism to dysphemism through orthophemism.

<sup>3</sup> "Orthophemism (Greek *ortho*- 'proper, straight, normal', cf. *orthodox*) is a term we have coined in order to account for direct or neutral expressions that are not sweet-sounding, evasive or overly polite (euphemistic), nor harsh, blunt or offensive (dysphemistic)." [Allan and Burrige 2006: 29].

The first part of this paper presents a case study into the structure and semantics of *unVable*, using a modest corpus of some 150 expressions retrieved from lexical sources. The cross-referencing of these adjectives with the occurrences provided by BYU-BNC produces a short corpus of substantivized *unVables*, which are then described semantically in context. This line of investigation brings to the fore the unquestionable affinity of the highly modalized double affixed adjective with both substantivization and euphemism. A second part examines the correlation between part-for-whole metonymy and X-phemism, while considering the expressive paradox behind the use of *unVables*.

## 1. The structure and semantics of *unVable*

### 1.1. Frequency of A>N conversion

Conversion is a word formation mechanism allowing for the shift in grammatical category of a word. Crystal's [1992] definition includes a comment on the productivity of the process, defining conversion as:

A term often used in the study of word-formation to refer to the derivational process whereby an item comes to belong to a new word-class without the addition of an affix. [...] other terms for this phenomenon, which is very common in English, include "zero derivation" and "functional shift".

According to Tournier [2007: 170], although N>V is by far the most common conversion subtype, A>N conversion now accounts for around 6% of overall word formation. Furthermore, in recent decades data suggests that A>N conversion, which represents overall the 3<sup>rd</sup> most productive conversion type, has been gaining ground. Tournier [2007: 198] indicates that A>N conversion has risen from 20% of all converted words in the past to 31% of newly converted words.

A previous study by Smith [2005] of lexicalized A>N conversions attested in *OED* [1996] for adjectives beginning with D, H and N produced the following data in the table below. The fact that the proportion of *-able* adjectives susceptible to conversion does not seem very high from these figures (9.7% of total occurrences) can be explained by two factors:

- Firstly, *-able* is such a productive suffix (Bauer 2001) that many derivatives are not lexicalized in dictionaries, including *OED*. This poses a problem for the identification of non lexicalized converted adjectives in a corpus. For instance, a word like *unconceivables* is unattested yet is found in a literary corpus. It could of course be considered a *hapax*, but *hapaxes* are representations of the evolution of word formation, especially when the meaning is readily retrievable (as is arguably the case of *unconceivables* in occurrence [3], see 1.3.1).
- Secondly, the number of lexicalized A>N conversions is far smaller than the number of actually occurring substantivized adjectives (SA). The BYU-BNC search of *unVables* has verified this (see 1.2.2).

SUFFIXES	% SA	LETTER D		LETTER H		LETTER N		TOTAL ADJ.
		NON SA	SA	NON SA	SA	NON SA	SA	
-AL	17.7	144	32	154	24	82	26	462
-AN	39.3	37	25	59	54	37	45	257
-ABLE	9.7	135	13	38	3	22	5	216
-ATE	3.7	39		12	1			53
-AR	13.3	5		12	1	9	3	30
-IC	18.4	176	38	296	71	129	27	737
-INE	31.4	6	3	18	5		3	35
-ISH	0.8	51		44		34	1	130
-IVE	21.2	78	31	9	3	22	8	151
-OID	47.7	12	9	18	17	4	5	65
-OUS	0	133		168		67		368
-Y	15.4	148	20	76	18	56	13	331
-LATINATE	47.3	19	14	17	26	13	4	93
-ED/EN	3.8	643	26	429	14	186	10	1308
-ENT/ANT	9.1	333	44	160	3	127	15	682
Ø	22.2	171	34	146	39	63	36	489
TOTAL		2156	289	1658	279	869	203	
% SA		11.82		14.256		18.936		

Figure 5: Rate of substantivization of adjectives according to their derivational suffixes (Smith 2005)

## 1.2. Frequency of occurrence of *unVables*

### 1.2.1. Why search for inflected forms?

Not all A>N conversions are equal in terms of the way they represent meaning. Traditionally, nouns refer whereas adjectives attribute properties (Jespersen [1921], Wierzbicka [1988], Smith [2005]). The realization that there are degrees to which adjectives access nounhood prompted a proposal in Smith [2005] to devise a scale of A>N conversion. The scale of conversion follows the individuation scale used for assessing types of nouns in Wierzbicka [1988]. It also takes into account inflectional evidence of word class conversion, such as the genitive and the plural inflections. The scale ranges from adjectives which continue to behave predicatively on the one hand (*the rich, the poor, the unemployed*), to adjectives which access ultimate nounhood, i.e. they have the ability to refer individually to a member of a group (*an oral, an original, an eccentric, today's special*). The first group are considered partially converted as explained by Poutsma [1929: 365], whereas the second group tend to be analyzed as an ellipsis of the noun.

When an adjective is partially converted into a noun, it is still felt to a certain extent as an adnominal word, i.e. we are more or less distinctly sensible of a noun being understood after it, wherefore it lacks most of the [above] characteristics, i.e. that of being inflected in the plural.

This leaves the inflected adjectives as the only verifiable A>N conversions. Smith [2005] proposes that this group, illustrated by such expressions as *valuables* (valuable items),

*leftovers* (leftover food and drink), *smalls* (underwear), *pearly whites* (teeth), *the blues* (music), *greens* (green plants or vegetables) *etc.*, fall in between partial conversion, to use Poutsma's [1929] term, and complete nominalization. The *unVable* A>N conversions under scrutiny here all fall into this group (Poutsma [1929]<sup>4</sup>, Wierzbicka [1988], Smith [2005]), suggesting the compatibility of the plural with the cognitive representation of the denotatum provided by these expressions. I will develop the semantic conceptualization of the plural in my semantic analysis of *unVables* in 1.3.

### 1.2.2. Data from BYU-BNC

I have compiled a list of lexicalized *unVable* adjectives listed in Merriam-Webster online, producing 150 in total. I then searched manually for occurrences in the BYU-BNC corpus for these adjectives, followed by a search for the inflected form *unVables*. The search for the inflected form is motivated both by the conclusions drawn in Smith [2005] on the role of the plural in total conversion, and on the unequivocal noun status of *unVables*, which rules out ellipsis as a possible counter-argument. I have discounted denominal *unNables* (such as *unseasonable*) and have chosen not to take into account allomorphic *inVible* derivatives such as *inexpressibles*, *irrepressibles*.

Out of 150 *unVable* adjectives listed in the dictionary, 82% (123) are attested in the singular (as adjectives) in BYU-BNC, and only a handful (13, *i.e.* under 10%) are attested in the inflected form<sup>5</sup>. There are however huge differences in frequency of occurrence of adjectives, ranging from 1 occurrence for *unadoptable* to 983 occurrences for *unreasonable*. Smith's [2005] corpus provides a few occurrences of A>N conversions where none were found in BYU-BNC (*unspeakables*, *unconceivables*). Google also provides some occurrences of *unVables*, as *unwhisperables*, *unthinkables*, *unutterables*. The table below provides the frequency of occurrence found in the BNC. The attested A>N conversions appear in bold, and potential *unVable* candidates appear in italics. I based the potential projected appearance of the *unVables* expressions on their ability to refer back to themselves metalinguistically, which I will develop further on.

<i>un-V-able</i>	Singular occurrences	Inflected occurrences		
listed adjectives in MW	BYU-BNC	BYU-BNC	Smith 2005	Google
<i>unadaptable</i>	0	0		
<i>unadoptable</i>	1	0		
<i>unaffordable</i>	104	0		
<i>unamenable</i>	1	0		
<i>unamiabile</i>	0	0		
<i>unanalyzable</i>	0	0		
<i>unassimilable</i>	7	0		
<i>unattainable</i>	104	0		
<i>unattributable</i>	7	0		

<sup>4</sup> "Many totally converted adjectives are practically pluralia tantum." Poutsma [1929: 368]. By this, Poutsma means that most adjectives that are considered to be fully converted carry a plural -s inflection and are not used in the singular with the same meaning.

<sup>5</sup> The attested converted adjectives appear in bold characters.

<i>un-V-able</i>	Singular occurrences	Inflected occurrences		
		BYU-BNC	Smith 2005	Google
listed adjectives in MW	BYU-BNC	BYU-BNC	Smith 2005	Google
<b>unavailable</b>	377	1		
unavoidable	395	0		
unbreachable	4	0		
unbreakable	57	0		
unbridgeable	39	0		
unbuildable	0	0		
unburnable	0	0		
uncapturable	0	0		
uncatchable	4	0		
uncategorizable	0	0		
unchallengeable	35	0		
uncharitable	35	0		
uncheckable	1	0		
unchewable	1	0		
<b>unclassifiable</b>	11	1		
uncollectible				
<b>unconceivable</b>	0	0	1	
uncontainable	9	0		
uncontrollable	212	0		
uncopyrightable	2	0		
uncorrectable	1	0		
uncountable	10	0		
uncrushable	2	0		
undanceable	0	0		
<b>undecidable</b>	4	2		
undecipherable	3	0		
<b>undefinable</b>	13	0		1 <sup>6</sup>
undeliverable	1	0		
undependable	5	0		
<i>undescribable</i>	0	0		
<b>undesirable</b>	617	24	1	
undetactable	46	0		
undeterminable	0	0		
undiagnosable	0	0		
undigestible	0	0		

<sup>6</sup> In Bybee [1985: 81] "One of the most persistent undefinables in morphology is the distinction between derivational and inflectional morphology."



<i>un-V-able</i>	Singular occurrences	Inflected occurrences		
		BYU-BNC	Smith 2005	Google
listed adjectives in MW	BYU-BNC	BYU-BNC	Smith 2005	Google
undiscoverable	1	0		
undisputable	1	0		
undoable	1	0		
undoubtable	0	0		
uneatable	10	0		
uneducable	0	0		
unelectable	16	0		
unendurable	0	0		
unenforceable	130	0		
unenviable	85	0		
unescapable	0	0		
unexcitable	1	0		
unexplainable	10	0		
unfeasible	12	0		
unfilmable	2	0		
unflyable	1	0		
unforeseeable	35	0		
unforgettable	180	0		
unforgivable	89	0		
unfulfillable	1	0		
ungraspable	5	0		
unguessable	1	0		
unidentifiable	44	0		
unignorable	5	0		
uninhabitable	37	0		
uninsurable	10	0		
uninterpretable	9	0		
unjustifiable	91	0		
unkillable	4	0		
unlearnable	0	0		
unlikeable	8	0		
<i>unlistenable</i>	4	0		
unlovable	19	0		
unmanageable	91	0		
unmarketable	2	0		
unmatchable	7	0		
unmeasurable	9	0		

<i>un-V-able</i>	Singular occurrences	Inflected occurrences		
listed adjectives in MW	BYU-BNC	BYU-BNC	Smith 2005	Google
unmemorable	25	0		
<b>unmentionable</b>	46	8		
unmissable	20	0		
unmixable	2	0		
unmovable	2	0		
unnameable	4	0		
unnegotiable	0	0		
unnoticeable	15	0		
<i>unobjectionable</i>	21	0		
<b>unobservable</b>	27	5		
unobtainable	66	0		
unopenable	3	0		
unpardonable	18	0		
unpassable	0	0		
unpatentable	1	0		
unperformable	0	0		
unplaceable	2	0		
unplausible	0	0		
unplayable	33	0		
unpredictable	674	0		
unprogrammable	0	0		
<i>unpronounceable</i>	26	0		
<b>unprintable</b>	20	0	1	
unprovable	13	0		
unquantifiable	36	0		
unquenchable	23	0		
unquestionable	53	0		
unreachable	21	0		
<i>unreadable</i>	133	0		
unrealizable	8	0		
unreasonable	983	0		
unreclaimable	1	0		
unrecognizable	51	0		
unreconcilable	2	0		
unrecoverable	5	0		
unrecyclable	1	0		
unredeemable	3	0		

<i>un-V-able</i>	Singular occurrences	Inflected occurrences		
		BYU-BNC	Smith 2005	Google
listed adjectives in MW	BYU-BNC	BYU-BNC	Smith 2005	Google
<b>unreliable</b>	478	1		
unremarkable	132	0		
unremovable	2	0		
<i>unrepeatable</i>	28	0		
unresolvable	13	0		
unrespectable	12	0		
unreturnable	0	0		
unreviewable	5	0		
unrideable	3	0		
unsal(e)able	33	0		
unscalable	1	0		
unsellable	4	0		
unshakable	15	0		
<b>unspeakable</b>	108	1	1	
unsurpassable	8	0		
unsusceptible	4	0		
unsustainable	77	0		
untam(e)able	2	0		
unteachable	7	0		
untestable	14	0		
<b>unthinkable</b>	351	0		attested <sup>7</sup>
untillable	0	0		
untraceable	25	0		
untranslatable	10	0		
untouchable	67	33		
ununderstandable	0	0		
unusable	90	0		
<b>unutterable</b>	17	0		attested <sup>8</sup>
unverifiable	7	0		
unviable	18	0		
unwatchable	3	0		
unwearable	3	0		
<b>unwhisperable</b>	0	0		attested
unwinnable	10	0		

<sup>7</sup> Lexicalized in *OED* and referenced in *Probert Encyclopaedia*; British slang for underwear.

<sup>8</sup> Lexicalized in *OED* as a noun, in the sense of "unmentionables" (slang) and in *Routledge Dictionary of Historical Slang*: synonym for *unmentionables*.

<i>un-V-able</i>	Singular occurrences	Inflected occurrences		
		BYU-BNC	Smith 2005	Google
listed adjectives in MW	BYU-BNC	BYU-BNC	Smith 2005	Google
unworkable	148	0		

Figure 2: Frequency of occurrence of *unVable* and *unVables* in *BYU-BNC* and *Smith (2005)*

### 1.2.3. How to account for the infrequency of *unVables*

Double affixing (*un+V+able*) followed by conversion (Adj>N) is bound to exert multiple constraints on the final expression. It has nevertheless been noted (Dalton-Puffer 1996) that the negative affix *un-* and the modal adjectival suffix *-able* are both very compatible, and tend to co-occur frequently in languages as noted by Bybee [1985:176]. As for the conversion process, as is apparent from the figures above, it selects only a small number of adjectives for substantivization. However, Smith's [2005] study of the effect of adjective morphology on the conversion rate tends to suggest a degree of correlation, however modest, between the *-able* suffix and A>N conversion. One can in fact assume that the relative affinity between substantivization and affixing is probably far more relevant than the data in figure 2 suggest. The difficulty with studying lexicographical sources, as was the case here, is that conversion is such a productive and spontaneous mechanism that most A>N conversions are not yet necessarily lexicalized (*unspeakables* only has 2 hits, but makes perfect sense and does not have the surprise factor of mere hapaxes). Of course, this is with the exception of some older converted adjectives which have become more or less obsolete such as *unwhisperables* (first occurrence 1837 according to *OED*).

The minute number of lexicalized or BNC attested nominalized *unVables* is all the more remarkable as deverbal adjectival *-able* derivation is remarkably productive. General agreement favours the word formation rule as given by Lyons [1978]: [Vtr + *able*= Adj]. However, as argued in Plag [1999: 86], the productivity of [Vtr + *able*= Adj] may have been overestimated in view of the impossibility of *\*saddleable*<sup>9</sup>, *\*doubleable*, *\*wriggleable* (examples cited in Plag [1999: 86] and taken from Szymanek [1985: 102]). The latter adjectives are not attested in Webster, nor *OED*, and produce no results in *BYU-BNC*. It seems that not all transitive verbs are compatible with *-able* derivation, although it is questionable. Plag [1999: 86] proposes that the restriction is phonological in so far as "*-able* does not attach to verbs containing a postconsonantal liquid."

This phonological restriction may not entirely solve the problem of the constraints on *Vable* formation: what accounts for the possibility of a complex compound derivative such as *knee-paddle-able*? Furthermore, other adjectives such as *\*unfoolable* remain impossible (according to my judgement). Lyons [1978: 528] agrees with Hasan's [1971] position that "only transitive verbs which can realize the process REACTION in a transitive clause but where the role AFFECTED can only be mapped onto the subject." Although Plag [2003] does not take sides, indicating morphosyntactic constraints remain unclear, his analysis of the semantics of *-able* adjectives echoes Lyons's [1978: 530] position that "adjectives can be interpreted in terms of a modalized passive phrase, the modality being that of ability or possibility". Plag [2003: 94] argues that *-able*

<sup>9</sup> Many thanks to Kate Burridge for pointing out that *saddleable* is now attested, and can be found in patent claims (see <http://www.patentstorm.us/patents/4794771/claims.html>).

adjectives are inherently modalized expressions, relating to either epistemic or root modality (possibility or capacity/ability).

The semantics of deverbal *-able* forms seem to involve two different cases, which have been described as 'capable of being Xed' (cf. *breakable, deterrable, readable*), and 'liable or disposed to X' (cf. *agreeable, perishable, variable; changeable* can have both meanings). What unites the two patterns is that in both cases the referent of the noun modified by the *-able* adjective is described as a potentially non volitional participant in an event. In this respect, *-able* closely resembles episodic *-ee*. Plag [2003: 94]

Dalton-Puffer [1996: 35-36] also emphasizes the modal meaning behind the *-able* suffix: but rather than dwelling over the semantic domain of passivity, the focus is on the affinity between the semantic building blocks of possibility and negation:

It seems to me that possibility and negation are more strongly linked to each other than passivity is to either of them, and I would take this as a first indicator that the passivity element is less central to the function of ABLE [...] than the other two elements. Negation and possibility both encode the speaker's view of a particular proposition or a particular portion of reality, which puts them both into the circle of modality. Bybee (1985: 176-178) also notes an affinity of negation and other mood meanings, both cross-linguistically and with special reference to affixing. In the case of ABLE [...] the most likely scenario is, then, that the "possibility" meaning attracts negative meanings which can be derivational (*unVable*) or syntactic (*NOT Vable*).

In stressing the affinity between negation and possibility, Dalton-Puffer [1996] makes clear that *unVable* adjectives are heavily marked with mood meanings, infusing them with heightened expressiveness. *Vable* adjectives encode possibility or likelihood, but there is another possible interpretation, that of deontic modality, as in the mandative construction *this bill is payable immediately*. Deontic modality is "associated with the social functions of permission and obligation", as underlined by Bybee [1995: 4].

From the data collected, the semantics of the combined derivative *unVable* appears particularly compatible with the deontic interpretation. Amongst the 13 *unVables* listed, the meaning of *-able* can indeed be perceived as deontic<sup>10</sup>, in particular when V refers to the act of utterance. Out of the 13 *unVables* listed, at least 6 refer to such verbs as *mention, utter, whisper, print, think, speak*. Indeed, according to *OED*, *unmentionable* applies to that which "cannot or should not be mentioned", and in the plural can refer to "a person or thing not to be mentioned (by name)". As for *unprintable*, the *OED* definition states "not fit to be printed" but the deontic shift to "which should not be printed" is not far off, as is evidenced by the corpus illustration [8] (see further on).

### 1.3. Semantic underspecification of *un-V-ables*

#### 1.3.1. Polysemy

The corpus data shows that the nature of the denotata referred to by *unVables* is variable: *unmentionables* can refer to underwear, genitalia, people, or any group of things or people which are considered unsuitable for mention. The retrieval of meaning

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, Tournier [2007: 287] refers to the sometimes deontological function of euphemism, to which I will return after a preliminary description of the semantics of the *unVables* in the corpus.

for the occurrences compiled in BNC and Smith [2005] is largely contextual. Smith [2005] shows that inflected substantivized adjectives are polysemic, but tend to undergo semantic specification in context. Various means of semantic specification are available, including enumeration of subcategories falling under the expression as in [5b], [6a] or [6d], pre- or post-modification as in [5d], [6e] or [11d], or even categorization as in [11a]. Other clues to reference are the function of *unVables* as an argument in a predicate as in [10a]. These contextual elements are parts of a frame which serve to pinpoint the meaning of the expression. In contexts where no information specifies the nature of the denotatum, the lexicalized meaning applies by default; the term *unmentionables* refers to underwear as in [6c], *untouchables* to a caste in [11b]. The following table lists the meaning and frames for the occurrences retrieved in BNC, which are reproduced in full in context below the table.

unVable	Denotatum	Contextual frames
1. <i>anavailables</i>	-individuals deemed 'unavailable' not lexicalized as noun in <i>OED</i>	[1] chosen/ Irish tour to New Zealand/ captain = rugby frame
2. <i>unclassifiables</i>	-satellite habitats which cannot be classified	[2] satellite habitats/ casinos/crates =satellite frame
3. <i>unconceivables</i>	- couples who cannot conceive (not lexicalized as noun in <i>OED</i> )	[3] frenzied/ relax/ do it =sex frame
4. <i>undecidables</i>	<i>OED</i> 1965 "Something that cannot be decided; that which is undecidable."	[4a] dialectical/ reasoning/ human thought [4b] semantics/discipline/scientists
5. <i>undesirables</i>	-people or items whose presence is not wanted	[5a] not belong/ city [5b] motorbikes/wheelchair/passage/ barrier [5c] press/ undesirable/ offering [5d] parents/ woman/ pursuers [5e] police/ jail/
6. <i>unmentionables</i>	-underclothes -genitalia -thoughts -things or people which should not be mentioned	[6a] activist/ Greenpeace/ [6b] hit/ member of the opposition/ [6c] girls/ gentleman/ view/ up [6d] nits, ringworm, fleas [6e] not tell
7. <i>unobservables</i>	-concepts/entities/ variables which cannot be observed	[7a]+ [7b] behaviourist/science/realist inductive/theory/ [7c] Popper/hypotheses/ [7d] consciousness/behaviourist tenet [7e] models/ data/ estimators/ policies
8. <i>unprintables</i>	-taboo swearwords which cannot/should not be printed (lexicalized in the sense of trousers according to <i>OED</i> )	[8] McEnroe/ tennis/ shout
9. <i>unreliables</i>	-unreliable political partisans (not lexicalized as noun in <i>OED</i> )	[9] Glasgow/ Republicans/ shoot
10. <i>unspeakables</i>	- people / things who/which should not be spoken of	[10a] living next door [10b] cross-dressing/ taboo
11. <i>untouchables</i>	-caste of people who should not be touched <i>OED</i> "A Hindu of a hereditary low caste, contact with whom was regarded as defiling members of higher	[11a] job/ reservation/ caste [11b] discrimination/caste/movement [11c] Indian/dirty/lower/ caste [11d] Britain/snobbery/golf/ boots/

	castes. Also <i>transf.</i> and <i>fig.</i> Cf. Harijan n." -more widely social outcasts	ridicule
12. <i>unwhisperables</i>	<i>OED</i> . "1837, trousers, slang."	[12] buying a pair/
13. <i>unutterables</i>	<i>OED</i> , "an unutterable thing 1788, or trousers 1843"	[13a] betray/ taboo [13b] short/ clothing

**Figure 3: the polysemy of unVables**

The occurrences retrieved in BNC, *OED* and Smith [2005] are as follows:

[1] And adding to the problems for the Irish tour to New Zealand — an expedition that captain Phil Danaher referred to as ‘a learning experience’— is the list of ‘**unavailables**’ which has almost rivalled the list of those chosen.

[2] Which is why, by the time of our story, there was a tangle of some two hundred satellite habitats, including five dozen tubes; fourteen platforms; seven wheels; sixteen miscellaneous **unclassifiables**, including casinos on immobilized system ships, crates, and permanent accidents; and three ziggurats of the Eladeldi -- all in Terran orbit, besides the poor old neglected Moon

[3] They may’ve capitulated and gone for adoption, but wasn’t it often the case that once this happened the frenzied **unconceivables** relaxed enough to do it? <sup>11</sup>

[4a] Dialectical reason encounters such products as **undecidables**: aporias -- because they seem to be at once the results of a communal enterprise while at the same time bearing witness to the fact that this enterprise never existed except as the inhuman reverse side of two opposed actions in which each aims to destroy the other.

[4b] But this history is easily overlooked, as is the modern computer’s capacity to accommodate “semantic” **undecidables**, in scientists’ eagerness to construct a myth of the internal consistency and autonomy of their discipline

[5a] They weren’t wanted. An instant of depression, of diminishment. They didn’t belong to the city, but they needed to be here. “I think she thinks we’re **undesirables**”. Milo took care to sound cheerful. <sup>12</sup>

[5b] This split barrier is an ideal solution for keeping out **undesirables** such as motorbikes while giving room for wheelchairs to pass through easily.

[5c] By August 1921 he was ‘inundated by the press and all sorts of **undesirables** have offered things’.

[5d] She had tapped into the rich vein of local “**undesirables**”, as her parents would call them.

[5e] Nicholson entered the scheme of things when Captain America and Billy the Kid are put into jail when a police force regards them as mere **undesirables**.

[6a] Jane was amused, however, to see that a whole large room was devoted to ‘activist’(said with a sort of spitting intonation) literature: Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace and other **unmentionables**.

[6b] Similarly, the chorus from the terraces whenever a member of the opposition was hit in the **unmentionables** and was being approached by the trainer with magic sponge and slopping bucket, was: ‘Nay lad, don’t wash ‘em.

[6c] The girls declined their gentlemanly offer to allow them over first, realising that once at the top, the boys would have a beautiful view of their **unmentionables**.

[6d] A litany of nits, ringworm, fleas and **unmentionables**...

[6e] And the and the little **unmentionables** you don’t want to tell me about.

<sup>11</sup> From Will Self, *How the dead live*. In Smith [2005] corpus.

<sup>12</sup> From Marian Keyes, *Last Chance Saloon*, 1999. In Smith [2005] corpus.

[7a] Now right, those parameters that we that we will learn will get this model in the end which contains only observable variables, only those, so it will contain prices, actual prices and actual supply alright. There's no ex expectations in there, no **unobservables**.

[7b] When Behaviouralists objected to the presence of **unobservables** in Realist theories, they did so in the name of science and the same basic idea of what science demands.

[7c] This is a purely inductive method, tempting both for its simplicity and because it does without **unobservables**. Popper insists that neither facts nor hypotheses simply obtrude themselves. .... Thus it is fine to think in terms of unobservable entities, provided that such theorizing results in statements capable of being tested

[7d] Ryle's examination of the relation between mind and body should not be confused with the behaviourist tenet that all "**unobservables**", such as consciousness, should be eliminated from the programme of psychology. J. B. Watson in 1914 and other behaviourist thinkers (Hull, Skinner) believed that an acquired behaviour element, the conditioned reflex for example, could be made to account for all behaviour, because such an element could be treated as a "building block" in theory much in the same way that nineteenth-century physicists used atoms to build up a theory of matter.

[7e] However, although many policy prescriptions are based on models estimated using such data, for example in taxation and labour supply, the properties of estimators for these models rely heavily on strong and usually untested stochastic assumptions. This importance of the stochastic specification plays a critical role in cross-section models in particular wherever the data under study suffer from censoring, truncation or grouping. In such common situations, the properties of the estimators depend crucially, for example, on the whole shape of the assumed distribution of **unobservables**.

[8] McEnroe shouted assorted **unprintables**.

[9] The book has explained that, having been a murderer of **unreliables** for the Republicans, he was shot at by a rival and went straight back to Glasgow.)

[10a] The Project, as you insist on calling it, has kept me from drinking at lunch-time, from drooling after unattainable women and from quarrelling with the **unspeakables** next door<sup>13</sup>.

[10b] He held out his hand to his junior master and composed his face into a solemn expression of trust. "Very well, Wilson," he said. "And now, I beg you, I beseech you, to reassure me that you are not also one of those **unspeakables** of which I think we both know the name only too well." Robert could not think what he meant by this. What else was he supposed to have been up to? Cross-dressing, perhaps?

[11a] On top of the existing reservations for "**untouchables**" castes, this brought the total proportion of reserved jobs to 49.5 per cent of all public-service posts.

[11b] The immediate aim was to open the roads to and from the temple to untouchables, but it proved to be a symbol of the movement to eliminate discrimination against **untouchables** in all spheres of life and a pointer to the need to abolish the caste system.

[11c] It is best known for persecuting Indian peasants, especially the lower castes or "**Untouchables**", who may have stolen from a neighbour or have demonstrated dirty habits.

[11d] On their forays to Britain they employed ridicule against the snobbery of golf clubs which insisted that the golfing **untouchables** must change their boots in the pro's shop.

---

<sup>13</sup> From Stephen Fry, *The Hippopotamus* 1995. Corpus Smith [2005].



[11e] Hindu society in traditional India was divided into five main strata: four varnas or castes, and a fifth group, the outcaste, whose members were known as **untouchables**.

[11f] He accepted the devotion of a prostitute who anointed his feet with costly perfume, and he dined out on a number of occasions with tax collectors and sinners, who represented the social outcasts — the "**untouchables**" of the day.

[12] *OED* 1837 Knickerbocker Mag. Mar. 288 How could he see about procuring himself a new pair of **unwhisperables** from his host, when [etc.].

[13a ] *OED* 1797 A. M. Bennett Beggar Girl II. xii. 226 Rosa did not faint, or betray any of the **unutterables** some of our young readers may expect.

[13b] *OED* 1843 I. F. Romer Rhone I. 322 His short **unutterables**, garnished down the seams with silver buttons.

### 1. 3. 2. The meaning of the plural: pluralia mostly A>N

As described above, the A>N conversions compiled here are inflected. Since the inflected form was deliberately selected, the next step is to verify whether these *unVables* are attested in the indefinite singular form (discounting the abstract or generic THE+ADJ form). A part-of-speech search in BNC for singular forms provided the following results. Out of the 13 attested *unVables* listed in figure 3, 2 occur in the indefinite singular- these are *untouchable* and *undesirable*, which refer to a single individual of the class. The other A>N conversions, seem to occur primarily in the plural, tending to confirm Wierzbicka's theory [1988: 476] that "adjectives are much easier to use as nouns (*i.e.* in referring expressions) in the plural than in the singular." Reference to a singular individual by saying *?\*an unmentionable*, *?\*an unspeakable*, *?\*an unavailable*, or referring to a swearword as *?\*an unprintable* seems less likely than the plural, and could be perceived as an ellipsis of the underlying head noun rather than a conversion.

I take the view that morphosyntax is not arbitrary and that the absence of singular denotation is meaningful. Instead, as posited in Wierzbicka [1988: 3], changes in morphosyntax reflect changes in meaning, not extensional meaning, but rather changes in conceptualization of the denotatum<sup>14</sup>. Accordingly, singularia tantum (nouns with a singular form only) and pluralia tantum (nouns with a plural form only) express categories which reflect cognitive representations of the denotatum, which are largely culture and language specific. The following table uses Wierzbicka's formal semantic classification of nouns [1988: 555-560] in order to determine the meaning of the plural in A>N conversions. A semantic analysis indicates *unVables* seem to fall under 3 main pluralia types:

- Some *unVables* refer to groups of heterogenous things which are subsumed under a supercategory such as *miscellaneous unclassifiables* [2], *unmentionables* in [6e]: these are "things of different kinds which are in the same place, for the same reason, one doesn't think of them as things one would count together because they are not of the same kind and because some of them may not be separate things" in the words of Wierzbicka [1988: 559 ];
- A small group of *unVables* refer to dual objects: *unmentionables* referring to pants [6a] or male genitalia [6b];

<sup>14</sup> "Every grammatical construction encodes a certain meaning, which can be revealed and rigorously stated, so that the meanings of different constructions can be compared in a precise and illuminating fashion, both within one language and across language boundaries." Wierzbicka [1988: 3]

- Finally, seemingly pointing to the anthropocentric nature of language and metonymy, the most common occurrence of *unVables* (15 occurrences out of 30) denotes a group of human beings which are not considered as separate individuals, but rather as members of a group – *unspeakables, untouchables, unreliaables, unavailables, undesirables*. Alternatively, it seems the denotatum can frequently be a word or an utterance (*unprintables*). I will return to this issue later in part 2.

NOUNS	FORMAL SEMANTIC CLASSIFICATION
TYPE8	Pluralia only occurring in the frame "a pair of"- names of dual objects ( <i>scissors goggles, shades</i> )
TYPE9	Pluralia only - names of groups of objects and/or "stuffs" ( <i>leftovers groceries</i> )
TYPE10	Pluralia MOSTLY names of collections of small things, possible to count but normally not counted ( <i>peas, noodles</i> )
TYPE 14	Pseudo-countables – names of heterogeneous classes of substances and choppable things ( <i>vegetables, narcotics, cosmetics</i> )

Figure 4: Formal classification of plural nouns according to Wierzbicka [1988: 555-560]

## 2. Conversion, metonymy and X-phemism

Polysemy is a common way in which metonymic concepts manifest themselves in language (see Lakoff 1987 and Taylor 1995). Panther & Radden [1999: 27]

### 2.1. Part-for-whole metonymy in *unVables*

#### 2.1.1. Metonyms and expressive function

Adj>N conversion is the syntactic functional theory explaining the use of a property-denoting adjective as a categorizing label to refer to an entity. In other words conversion is closely related to part-for-whole metonymy, also called synecdoche, which is defined by Seto [1999: 92] as "a conceptual transfer phenomenon based on the semantic inclusion between a more comprehensive and a less comprehensive category." As metonymy is a conceptualizing device based on contiguity (Tournier 2007, Blank 1999, Bonhomme 2006), one might propose that metonymy is the conceptual counterpart to the syntactic conversion process.

Metonymy as a linguistic device is the transfer of a word to another concept on the basis of conceptual contiguity between a donator and a target concept. Any spontaneous metonymy can be adopted by the speech community and thus become lexicalized. [Blank 1999: 184]

Much literature has come about in recent years to pluck metonymy and metaphor out of the shadows of stylistics and poetry, pulling them firmly into the limelight of conventional speech. Cognitive linguistics has provided new tools for the study of

metonymy, in particular by using the frame model and the spatial metaphor theory developed in Lakoff [1993].

By recurring to frames, we can easily understand metonymic phenomena because frames — and this is a point I would like to stress — are non-linguistic, conceptual wholes. When acknowledging the latter fact, we do not have to overproliferate linguistic-semantic descriptions only for the sake of metonymies. Contiguity is the relation that exists between elements of a frame or between the frame as a whole and its elements. [Koch 1999: 146]

One of the benefits of the frame model as proposed in Bonhomme [2006] is that this conceptual framework provides for both static and dynamic mental representations of events and participants. This suggests the conceptual contiguity relation is established within a given space and time context, giving heightened relevance to the metonymic expression.

All conceptual relations relevant to metonymy are either co-present or successive in time. These two very fundamental aspects in human conceptualization constitute meta-frames which contain typical conventionalized contiguity schemas. [Blank 1999: 184]

One can argue that the use of *unVables* draws upon the frame events constructed by the context, and gives the expression added salience and expressive function. Using the term *unavailable*s in [1] to denote the players unavailable for the game, selects and focuses on the situational and informational relevance of the denotatum rather than the conventional categorizing identity. The heightened relevance of the metonymic use of adjectives as nouns is echoed in Wierzbicka's [1988: 474] statement that "nouns derived from names of other predicates (adjectives or verbs) tend to develop an expressive component". This expressive component means that the locution is loaded with connotations in the sense given by Allan [2006: 47]

The connotations of a word or longer expression are semantic effects that arise from the encyclopedic knowledge about its denotation and also from experiences, beliefs, and prejudices about the contexts in which the expression is typically used. [Allan 2006: 47]

Therefore, the locution is likely to be received with heightened emotional response. The inference is that A>N conversions are in fact highly compatible with X-phemism polarity, which seems to be confirmed in the 13 *unVables* in the corpus.

Euphemism is a socialized re-evaluating, mitigating speech act in the face of a risky referent. As observed by Pauwels [1999] metonymy is in perfect keeping with euphemism. » [*L'euphémisme est un acte de parole réévaluatif, détensif et socialisé face à un référent à risque... comme l'a observé Pauwels (1999), la métonymie convient parfaitement au processus de l'euphémisme.*] [Bonhomme 2006: 160]

### **2.1.2. X-phemism polarity**

As argued by Pauwels [1999: 272], metonyms have the potential to be either euphemistic or dysphemistic:

Metonymy often seems to function as a kind of 'avoidance strategy' for reasons of euphemism perhaps. Conversely, it can also function as a 'focusing strategy,' which, in extreme cases, can result in dysphemism.

This raises the question of the contrast between euphemism, dysphemism and orthophemism (the 'neutral' alternative expression). In the words of Allan and Burridge [2006: 31]: "A dysphemism is a word or phrase with connotations that are offensive either about the denotatum and/ or to people addressed or overhearing the utterance." This definition compared with that of euphemism seems to point to a clearcut distinction between the two. If *unmentionables* is a definite euphemism for underwear, then *Y-fronts* or *knickers* would tend to fall on the dysphemistic side of the neutral expression *underwear*, being more "graphic" in the conceptualization of the denotatum. Still, without context, lexical expressions can of course fall on either side of the spectrum.

## 2.2. Ambiguity of censoring in *unVables*

### 2.2.1. *-able and modalized expression: the role of V semantics*

The meaning of *unVable* derivatives rests upon the notion of modality (cannot/should not). As mentioned earlier (see 1.2.3.), *-able* lends itself to modalized interpretation: *unVables* occasionally relate to the capacity/ability of the denotatum, but more often than not to censure and proscription. The table under 2.3.1 describing the polysemy of *unVables* shows the ambiguity inherent to the modal: either *-able* is indicative of inherent inability, or of a proscription or censoring. This is confirmed by the *OED* entries for the adjectives: the adjective *unspeakable* can mean either:

- a) "Incapable of being expressed in words; inexpressible, indescribable, ineffable".
- b) "*spec.* Indescribably or inexpressibly bad or objectionable".
- c) "Incapable of being spoken or uttered; that may not be spoken".
- d) "U.S. Unwilling or unable to speak".

Similarly, the meaning of *unutterable* can be:

- a) "transcending utterance, inexpressible, ineffable"
- b) "that may not be uttered or spoken"
- c) "incapable of being can uttered, unpronounceable"

As far as connotations are concerned, the negative or positive polarity of *unVable* metonyms depends largely upon the FRAME event which is partaken in. In other words, the meaning of the verb at the heart of *unVable* is central to its expressive effect. This is evidenced by the difference between for instance *undesirable* (a group of things or people considered unwanted) as opposed as *unclassifiables* (that which cannot be classified): calling something *undesirable* amounts to attributing negative properties to the denotatum, whereas designating something as *unclassifiable* does not have the same extralinguistic consequences. To further illustrate, the property *unbreakable* is good thing when it pertains to glasswear for instance, whereas it is negatively-infused if describing a spy from whom information must be retrieved.

Amongst the 13 attested *unVables* retrieved from BNC, 3 of them – *unclassifiables*, *unobservables* and *undecidables* - fall under the orthophemism category. In each occurrence, the label represents the most objective way of referring to a collection of heterogeneous entities.

On the other hand, a semantic group (*unspeakables*, *unmentionables*, *unprintables*, *unwhisperables*, *unthinkables*) stands out, metalinguistically referring to the act of self-

censuring one's speech. Although as Allan and Burridge [2006: 13] point out "People constantly censor the language they use (we differentiate this from the institutionalized imposition of censorship)", in this case, the censoring is deliberate and explicitly underlined. Interestingly, other *unVable* adjectives listed in the corpus (figure 2) are not attested as nouns, yet would be compatible such as *undescribable*, *unlistenable*, *unobjectionable*, *unpronounceable*, *unreadable*, *unrepeatable*<sup>15</sup>. Why do some of these *unVables* appear in the dictionary whereas others don't? The answer to this question probably lies in extralinguistic motivation and diachronic change, not to mention the playfulness factor as evidenced by derivational creations such as *dontmentionums* or *untalkaboutables*.

The coat was sky-blue; the vest white as a milk-strainer; while the oh-don't-mention-ums, in the fashion of the day, were so amazingly skin-tight, that any sudden accession to the growth of his limbs, would have caused a rending, as of the bark from a hide-bound tree! [Rev. Baynard 1852]

As homage to its high productivity, the *unVable* model does in fact extend to prepositional verbs, as in the currently ubiquitous adjective *unputdownable*. This 1947 formation receives no less than 6 hits on BYU-BNC. Surprisingly, many similar formations such as *unwipeupable* (1864), *untalkaboutable* (1862), *unrelyuponable* (1840) *undowithoutable* (1844) actually originate from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As has been noted by Mickael Quinion, there is today a renewed trend for formation of *unVable* such *unwearoutable* (1968) and *unswitchoffable* (1974), although there is little evidence of their use as nouns so far.

### 2.2.3. Diachronic perspective on unVables

As described in Allan and Burridge [2006: 27], the focus of taboo changes over time, and with it the productivity of morphological processes motivated by euphemism:

A taboo is a proscription of behaviour for a specifiable community of people, for a specified context, at a given place and time.

*UnVables* first made their appearance in the Victorian period as an answer to the sociocultural landscape of the time, just as compound adjectives like *vertically-challenged* appeared during the 1990s as an answer to the politically correct era. The original *unVables* created during that time refer mainly to breeches or trousers, but Over time, the meaning of the *unVables* metonyms has evolved to denote other kinds of taboo areas, since women wearing trousers quickly became commonplace. Today, *vertically-challenged* brings to mind connotations that are no longer euphemistic but rather sarcastic, jocular or second degree. It would seem that *unVables* are now frequently used as dysphemistic euphemisms, *i.e.* "expressions at odds with the intentions that lurk behind them. More formally, the locution (the form of words) is at variance with the reference and illocutionary point of utterance (*i.e.* what the speaker is doing in making the utterance)." Allan and Burridge [2006: 39].

The change in connotations of an expression like *unmentionables* (and its synonyms *inexpressibles*, *unhintables*, *unspeakables*, *unwhisperables*) can be accounted for by a shift in taboos: today, sexual taboos and reference to underwear is not subject to such

<sup>15</sup> To these we might add *unhintables* cited by Allan and Burridge [2006: 239].

censure as it was 30 years ago. Tournier [2007: 291] points out that in recent times social euphemisms have become more prominent than sexual euphemisms. The use of a euphemism for a denotatum that no longer requires mitigation becomes at odds with the expected social practices, making them tongue-in-cheek. Euphemisms used outside a taboo context actually draw attention to themselves. The corpus occurrences of *unVables* tend to exhibit such paradoxical connotations: calling the next door neighbours *unspeakables* in [10a] or referring to McEnroe's *unprintables* in [8] serves to refer back to the implicit proscription to not mention names or swearwords, hence saying out loud what should not be said.

## Conclusion

This case study into *unVables* shows that there is evidence indicating the morphological formation of the expression is directly related to its expressive potential in discourse. To be more specific, *unVables* are carriers of mood, *i.e.* the expressions signal "what the speaker is doing with the proposition", or what the speaker's intention is (Bybee [1985: 168]). The morphological markers of mood are threefold, indicating that *unVables* encode 3 levels of modalization: firstly there is the combination of the negative prefix *-un* with the modal suffix *-able*. Secondly, there is the substantivization of the deverbal adjective relying on metonymic associations. As noted in recent research, metonymy is not just a rhetorical trope, it is at heart a discourse-oriented phenomenon expressing an attitude on the part of the speaker. This attitude, as explained in Bonhomme [2006: 160] can in fact be "euphemistic, jocular or polemic". It follows that *unVables* are likely carriers of Xphemism in discourse, although where they fall on the Xphemism scale depends on the pragmatic context of their occurrence. In any case *unVables* are inherently marked expressions: they carry modalized content and occur in frames which serve to pin down the otherwise polysemic nature of the expression.

Allan [2006: 147] defines both euphemism and dysphemism as "alternative effects of connotation", thus placing them on a polarized X-phemism scale ranging from positive to negative connotation. Pragmatically, euphemism has the power to "motivate (a) the choice between near synonyms and (b) the development of new expressions, so as to avoid injury, or to indicate in-group solidarity, politeness, deference, "political correctness", insult or aggression." Both effects seem largely contrastive, and yet, both values can co-occur in an expression. *Unmentionables* used today has an extended meaning compared to its original sense of underclothes. Its polysemy can be accounted for by the underlying metonymy and intentional semantic underspecification. This can be interpreted in two opposing ways – either the underspecification is borne out of a euphemistic desire to mitigate, or the *unVables* expression is to be taken as a deontic modal, referring metalinguistically to the taboo surrounding the denotatum, thus laying focus on the self-censure at the heart of taboos. Wherever they refer metalinguistically to self-censure, one might be tempted to call them dysphemistic euphemisms, although they have little in common with the illustrations provided in Allan and Burrige [2006] for such expressions (the affectionate use of swearwords). Instead, these expressions call to mind other dysphemistic devices, such as flippant colloquialisms for death like *cark it*, *peg out*, *kick the bucket*<sup>16</sup>. If one accepts that dysphemism occurs when the intention of the speaker is at odds with the choice of wording, then the use of *unVables* is

---

<sup>16</sup> Many thanks to Kate Burrige for her helpful suggestions and commentary.

a case in point. As the intention of the speaker in using classic Victorian *unVables* draws attention to the (perceived) taboo rather than concealing or circumventing it, *unVables* paradoxically allow the "speaker's dysphemistic intention (to) be achieved euphemistically", in the words of Allan and BurrIDGE [2006: 39].

Some artful euphemisms (...) are meant to be as revealing – and in their own way as provoking – as diaphanous lingerie. As bawdy authors like Shakespeare and political satirists like Swift and Orwell well know, titillation of the audience is the best way to draw attention to their message. [Allan 2012: 34]

This image perfectly underlines the ambivalent nature of *unVables*: their use simultaneously signals a desire to minimize the taboo topic while emphasizing the proscription, which amounts to placing the taboo under a magnifying glass. Consequently, the pragmatic effect achieved in discourse can often be one of provocation or satire. Such euphemisms which draw attention to themselves, or "provocative euphemisms" according to BurrIDGE [2005: 39], do not intend to camouflage but rather to tease, "concealing just enough to become prurient and appealing." Still, these somewhat schizophrenic euphemisms have come full circle. They themselves obey the ultimate motivation behind taboos – humankind's fear of "losing control of their destinies", as noted by Allan and BurrIDGE [2006: 247].

## Bibliography

- ALLAN** Keith, *Natural Language Semantics*, Oxford and Malden MA: Blackwell, 2006 [2001].
- ALLAN** Keith, "X-phemism and creativity", in Lexis 7, *Euphemism as lexical creation/ Euphemism as a word-formation process*, 2012 (to be published). Accessed online via <http://users.monash.edu.au/~kallan/papers/Xcreativity.pdf>
- ALLAN** Keith and **BURRIDGE** Kate, *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censuring of Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- BAUER** Laurie, *Morphological Productivity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- BLANK** Andreas, "Copresence and succession: a cognitive typology of metonymy", in **PANTHER** Klaus-Uwe and **RADDEN** Günter (Eds.), *Metonymy in Language and Thought*, Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1999: 169-185.
- BONHOMME** Marc, *Le discours métonymique*, Bern/Berlin: Peter Lang, 2006.
- BURRIDGE** Kate, *Weeds in the garden of words: further observations on the tangled history of the English language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- BYBEE** Joan, *Morphology – a study of the relation between meaning and form*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1985.
- BYBEE** Joan, "Introductory essay", in **BYBEE** Joan and **FLEISCHMAN** Suzanne (Eds), *Modality in Grammar and Discourse*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1995: 1-15.
- DALTON-PUFFER** Christiane, "From *unasecndlic* to *unspeakable*: the role of domain structure in morphological change", in **FISIAK** Jacek and **GRYGIER** Marcin (Eds), *Advances in English historical linguistics*, Trends in Linguistics, Studies and Monographs 112, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1996: 33-52.

- DAVIES** Mark, BYU-BNC: *The British National Corpus*, (2004-). Accessed online at <http://corpus.byu.edu/bnc>.
- DIRVEN** René, "Conversion as a conceptual metonymy of event schemata", in PANTHER Klaus-Uwe and RADDEN Günter (Eds.), *Metonymy in Language and Thought*, Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1999: 275-287.
- HALL** Rev Baynard R., *Frank Freeman's Barbershop*, 1852. Accessed online <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/saxon/servlet/SaxonServlet?source=utc/xml/responses/proslav/prfibrha.xml&style=utc/xsl/utcprint.xsl&n1=16&print=yes&clear-stylesheet-cache=yes>
- KEYES** Ralph, *Unmentionables: From family Jewels to Friendly Fire – What We Say instead of What We Mean*, London: John Murray Publishers, 2010.
- KOCH** Peter, "Frame and Contiguity: On the Cognitive Bases of Metonymy and Certain Types of Word Formation", in PANTHER Klaus-Uwe and RADDEN Günter (Eds.), *Metonymy in Language and Thought*, Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1999: 139-168.
- KÖVECSÉS** Zoltán and **RADDEN** Günter, "Towards a Theory of Metonymy", in PANTHER Klaus-Uwe and RADDEN Günter (Eds.), *Metonymy in Language and Thought*, Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1999: 17-59.
- LAKOFF** George, "The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor", in ORTONY A. (Ed), *Metaphor and Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993 [1979]: 202-251.
- LAWRENCE** Jeremy, *Unmentionables and other euphemisms*, London: G. T. Foulis & Co. Ltd, 1973.
- LYONS** Christopher, *Semantics, Vol 2*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.
- OED**, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011 [1996]. Accessed via online subscription, <http://www.oed.com/>
- PARTRIDGE** Eric, *Routledge Dictionary of Historical Slang*, Routledge, 1973. Accessed online at <http://www.bookrags.com/tandf/unutterables-unwhisperables-tf/>
- PAUWELS** Paul, "Putting Metonymy in its place", in PANTHER Klaus-Uwe and RADDEN Günter (Eds.), *Metonymy in Language and Thought*, Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1999: 255-272.
- PLAG** Ingo, *Word Formation in English*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- PLAG** Ingo, *Morphological Productivity: structural constraints in English derivation*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1999.
- PROBERT** Mat and Leela, *Probert Encyclopaedia*, since 1993 online. Accessed via <http://www.probertencyclopaedia.com/>
- POUTSMA** Hendrik, *A Grammar of later Modern English*, vol III, Groningen: P. Noordhoff, 1929. Accessible via openlibrary.org at <http://www.archive.org/stream/grammaroflatemod03poutuoft#page/n7/mode/2up>
- QUINION** Mickael, *World Wide Words*. <http://www.worldwidewords.org/ga/ga-unp1.htm>
- SETO** Ken-ichi, "Distinguishing Metonymy from Synecdoche", PANTHER Klaus-Uwe and RADDEN Günter (Eds.), *Metonymy in Language and Thought*, Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1999: 91-120.
- SMITH** Chris, Unpublished PhD thesis, "The substantivization of adjectives in contemporary English", Paris 4-Sorbonne, 2005.
- TOURNIER** Jean, *Introduction à la lexicogénétique de l'anglais contemporain*, Slatkine: Genève, 2007 [1985].



**WARREN** Beatrice, "Aspect of referential metonymy", in **PANTHER** Klaus-Uwe and **RADDEN** Günter (Eds.), *Metonymy in Language and Thought*, Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1999: 121-135.

**WIERZBICKA** Anna, *The Semantics of Grammar*, Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1988.