



Strategic Euphemism and National Face-Work: A Sociolinguistic Study of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address

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Abstract. *This study examines the strategic role of euphemism in Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, arguing that it was instrumental not only in managing collective grief but also in preserving the nation's symbolic dignity. While much scholarship on the Gettysburg Address has concentrated on rhetorical artistry or historical significance (Wills, 1992; White, 2009), relatively few have analyzed it through the combined lens of sociolinguistics, specifically euphemism and face-work. Drawing on Allan and Burridge's (2006) framework of euphemism and Goffman's (1955) theory of face, this paper situates Lincoln's speech within the broader sociolinguistic processes of healing, unity, and image restoration. Through a qualitative textual analysis, the study identifies three dominant euphemistic strategies: sanctification of sacrifice through sacred language, collectivization through inclusive pronouns, and redefinition of crisis as a "new birth of freedom." These strategies operated at semantic, pragmatic, and sociopolitical levels to protect national face, transform perceptions of the Civil War, and realign public consciousness toward unity and resilience. Beyond historical interpretation, this research highlights the relevance of euphemism and face-work in contemporary political communication. Leaders in modern contexts from economic crises to global pandemics continue to rely on euphemistic framing to manage uncertainty and inspire solidarity. By revisiting Lincoln's address through this sociolinguistic perspective, the study demonstrates how language can simultaneously mitigate trauma, construct identity, and articulate a hopeful collective future.*

Keywords: *Euphemism; Face-Work; Gettysburg Address; Political Discourse; Sociolinguistics.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Delivered on November 19, 1863, in the aftermath of one of the bloodiest battles of the American Civil War, Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address has achieved canonical status in U.S. history. Despite its brevity just 272 words the speech has been celebrated for its rhetorical elegance, historical resonance, and enduring cultural impact (Wills, 1992; White, 2009). While its stylistic qualities and political implications have been widely discussed, relatively little attention has been paid to the speech as an instance of sociolinguistic strategy, where euphemism and face-work played crucial roles in shaping public perception during a period of existential crisis.

The Civil War (1861–1865) inflicted devastating human losses, with estimates ranging from 620,000 to 750,000 deaths (Faust, 2008). Beyond the battlefield, it fractured the nation's political and cultural identity. In such a context, Lincoln's words functioned not merely as a memorial tribute but as a carefully constructed discourse designed to manage grief, restore dignity, and reimagine the future.

Sociolinguistics emphasizes the interplay between language and society, examining how discourse reflects and shapes social realities (Holmes, 2013). In political communication, euphemism is more than a means of softening harsh truths; it is a discursive tool for reframing collective experience, preserving respectability, and guiding ideological interpretation (Allan & Burrige, 2006; Crespo-Fernández, 2017; Hughes, 2018). Parallel to this, Goffman's (1955) concept of face and face-work illuminates how individuals and communities manage their public self-image. Applied to political contexts, face-work extends beyond personal courtesy to encompass national dignity, identity, and legitimacy.

This paper argues that the Gettysburg Address exemplifies how euphemism and face-work converge to perform what can be termed national face-work, where linguistic strategies simultaneously console, unify, and reorient a fractured polity. The originality of this study lies in foregrounding euphemism as not merely rhetorical ornamentation but as a central sociolinguistic mechanism in political healing. While previous analyses often frame the Gettysburg Address as a masterpiece of rhetoric or a turning point in American history, this study highlights how Lincoln's language achieved its effect by deploying euphemism as a form of symbolic restoration.

The implications extend beyond the nineteenth century. In contemporary political crises whether in speeches addressing terrorism, economic downturns, or public health emergencies leaders continue to employ euphemistic discourse to mitigate anxiety and reaffirm collective identity. By reexamining the Gettysburg Address in this light, the study not only deepens historical understanding but also offers insights for present-day political communication.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous Studies

Scholarship on the Gettysburg Address has been extensive, with much attention devoted to its rhetorical artistry and historical significance. Wills (1992) famously argued that the speech "remade America" by redefining the nation's founding ideals in light of the Civil War. White (2009) emphasized Lincoln's ability to condense complex moral and political visions into concise language, reinforcing the Address's place as a rhetorical masterpiece. Such studies underscore the speech's symbolic power but often stop short of examining its sociolinguistic mechanisms.

Research on euphemism demonstrates its widespread use in political contexts. Allan and Burridge (2006) defined euphemism as linguistic substitution designed to mitigate discomfort, taboo, or offense. Crespo-Fernández (2017) analyzed euphemism in the British press, revealing its ideological role in reframing political issues. Hughes (2018) explored how euphemism and creativity are deployed to mask conflict and legitimize authority. These studies highlight euphemism's discursive power but do not directly analyze its role in Lincoln's address.

Face-work theory provides another foundation. Goffman's (1955) analysis of face emphasized the strategies individuals use to maintain dignity in interaction. Later work in politeness studies, such as Locher and Watts (2019) and Culpeper (2021), expanded this to relational work, highlighting the negotiation of collective identity. While these theories have been applied to political debates and intercultural communication, their application to historical speeches such as the Gettysburg Address remains limited.

Recent scholarship has extended the study of euphemism in political discourse. Bhatia and Kranert (2020) analyzed euphemism as part of global crisis communication, showing its role in legitimizing authority. Ekström and Patrona (2021) examined mediated political discourse, identifying euphemism as a recurring strategy in managing sensitive topics. Haim and Graef (2022) further highlighted euphemism's role in sustaining trust in global political rhetoric. These recent contributions reinforce the relevance of euphemism studies and justify re-examining the Gettysburg Address through a sociolinguistic lens.

Theoretical Frame

The convergence of euphemism and face-work is crucial for understanding Lincoln's address. Euphemism provides linguistic means of avoidance and reframing, while face-work explains the social motive of preserving dignity. Lincoln's phrase "a new birth of freedom" exemplifies this convergence: it replaces imagery of death with organic renewal, enacting corrective face-work on behalf of the nation. Conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) further illuminates how euphemism operates, as metaphors like "birth" and "consecration" reframe devastation as transformation.

Existing literature shows that while euphemism and face-work are well studied individually, their combined role in the Gettysburg Address has been underexplored. This study addresses that gap, situating Lincoln's speech within broader traditions of euphemistic political discourse.

3. METHODOLOGY

Data

The primary data for this study is Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, delivered on November 19, 1863, at the dedication of the Soldiers' National Cemetery in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. The text, preserved in multiple manuscript versions, has been consistently recognized as a canonical artifact of American political discourse (Lincoln, 1863; Wills, 1992).

Procedure

The analysis involved three stages:

- a) Identification: Conducting close reading to detect euphemistic expressions and metaphorical constructions.
- b) Categorization: Grouping identified expressions into thematic strategies of sanctification, collectivization, and redefinition.
- c) Interpretation: Contextualizing each strategy in relation to semantic substitution, pragmatic function, and sociopolitical effect.

Analytic Framework

The evaluation employed three complementary criteria:

- Semantic substitution: Examining how euphemistic terms replace more direct or literal alternatives (e.g., "consecrate" vs. "bury").
- Pragmatic function: Analyzing communicative effects within the speech context (e.g., elevating sacrifice, minimizing despair).
- Sociopolitical impact: Assessing potential influence on audience perception and national identity formation.

This framework aligns with established approaches in political discourse analysis (Charteris-Black, 2019; Crespo-Fernández, 2017), ensuring that findings integrate linguistic detail with broader sociocultural implications.

Limitations

The study is limited to one text, the Bliss Copy, which excludes variation across manuscript versions. Its qualitative approach restricts generalizability, as it does not examine larger corpora of political speech. However, the single-text focus enables detailed analysis of each euphemistic choice, offering insights that may inform broader comparative research.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Sanctification as Face-Saving Strategy

Lincoln sanctifies the battlefield by describing it as “consecrated” and “hallowed.” Semantically, these terms replace literal references to death or burial. Pragmatically, they shift focus from violent loss to sacred purpose, elevating the soldiers’ sacrifice above the brutality of war. Sociopolitically, this strategy converts a potential symbol of national breakdown into a moral triumph, protecting the nation’s face.

“We cannot dedicate we cannot consecrate we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract.”

This passage demonstrates how Lincoln attributes sanctity to the fallen rather than to his own words, enacting humility while elevating sacrifice. Churchill employed a similar device in World War II, describing Britain’s suffering as a “sacred ordeal” that would ultimately lead to victory (Churchill, 1940). Both leaders deployed sanctification to transform grief into honor, ensuring the nation’s dignity remained intact.

Collectivization for Social Cohesion

Lincoln repeatedly uses inclusive pronouns to construct unity:

“Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation...”

“We are engaged in a great civil war...”

“It is for us the living...”

Semantically, we and our erase boundaries between North and South, living and dead. Pragmatically, they invite the audience into a shared identity and shared responsibility. Sociopolitically, they constitute what Anderson (1991) calls an “imagined community.”

Mandela used a similar strategy in 1994, declaring: “We enter into a covenant that we shall build a society in which all South Africans, both black and white, will be able to walk tall.”

Both Lincoln and Mandela mobilized collectivization to heal divided nations through inclusive pronouns.

Redefinition to Frame The Future

Lincoln’s most enduring euphemism is his redefinition of war as renewal:

“...that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom...”

“...that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

Semantically, “birth” replaces imagery of death with vitality and hope. Pragmatically, it reframes the Civil War as generative rather than destructive. Sociopolitically, it projects a national identity centered on democratic renewal.

Roosevelt's 1933 inaugural speech similarly redefined the Great Depression as a "challenge to be met with courage," while Obama's 2008 campaign invoked "the audacity of hope" (Obama, 2006). Jacinda Ardern, after the Christchurch attack in 2019, reframed tragedy as an opportunity to strengthen inclusivity. These examples illustrate the continuity of redefinition as euphemistic face-work in crisis leadership.

Integrating the Three Levels

To synthesize the findings, Table 1 summarizes how Lincoln's euphemistic strategies function across semantic, pragmatic, and sociopolitical dimensions.

Table 1. Euphemistic Strategies in the Gettysburg Address

Strategy	Example from the Speech	Semantic Dimension	Pragmatic Dimension	Sociopolitical Dimension
Sanctification	"consecrate this ground" "hallow this ground"	Sacred terms replace literal references to death or burial.	Elevates sacrifice into sacred duty; emphasizes humility of speaker and nobility of soldiers.	Preserves national dignity by reframing loss as moral triumph.
Collectivization	"our fathers..." "we are engaged" "for us the living"	Pronouns dissolve divisions and foster inclusivity.	Generates solidarity; positions audience as participants in the national project.	Constructs a unified imagined community (Anderson, 1991).
Redefinition	"a new birth of freedom" "government of the people..."	"Birth" replaces destruction with renewal, projecting vitality and continuity.	Reframes war as transformation; directs grief toward collective purpose.	Legitimizes sacrifice as foundation of democratic renewal.

These comparative examples are not included as mere illustrations of rhetorical similarity, but as evidence of the recurrent sociolinguistic role of euphemism across different contexts. From Lincoln's sanctification of sacrifice in the nineteenth century, to Churchill's framing of Britain's wartime suffering as a sacred trial, Mandela's use of inclusive pronouns in post-apartheid South Africa, Obama's invocation of hope during economic and social crisis, and Ardern's reframing of tragedy as an opportunity for solidarity, the underlying function remains consistent: euphemism operates as collective face-work. It allows leaders to mitigate trauma, preserve dignity, and redirect public attention toward unity and renewal. This continuity across

cultures and eras confirms that euphemism is not simply ornamental language but a recurring sociolinguistic resource, central to political discourse whenever national identity and legitimacy are at stake.

5. CONCLUSION

The Gettysburg Address illustrates how euphemism operates not merely as rhetorical ornament but as a sociolinguistic strategy of national repair. Through sanctification, collectivization, and redefinition, Lincoln managed to honor the dead, unify the living, and project a vision of democratic renewal. By analyzing these strategies across semantic, pragmatic, and sociopolitical dimensions, this study demonstrates how euphemism constitutes a form of national face-work.

The contribution of this research lies in highlighting euphemism as central to the speech's impact, filling a gap in scholarship that has emphasized rhetorical or historical aspects while neglecting its sociolinguistic mechanisms. This analysis also underscores the enduring relevance of euphemism in political communication. From Churchill to Mandela, Roosevelt to Obama, Ardern to contemporary leaders, euphemistic framing continues to serve as a resource for managing crisis, preserving dignity, and inspiring resilience.

For contemporary politics, Lincoln's address offers lessons in ethical communication. Euphemism, when employed responsibly, can help leaders navigate sensitive contexts without denying reality. It can dignify sacrifice, promote solidarity, and reframe crisis as opportunity. In an era marked by polarization and global challenges, these functions remain as vital as they were in 1863. Beyond its historical and theoretical contributions, the analytical framework proposed in this study offers a valuable lens for examining contemporary political communication in diverse contexts, including Indonesia. Indonesian leaders, navigating challenges of national unity and public trust, similarly employ discursive strategies to manage perception and foster social cohesion during crises.

Future studies could extend this analysis by comparing euphemistic strategies across cultures or examining how digital media reshapes political euphemism in real time. Such work would deepen our understanding of how language continues to function as a resource for resilience, legitimacy, and collective identity in the face of crisis.

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