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Euphemisms in South African English economic discourse: Socio-cultural aspects

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Abstract

South African English economic discourse remains underexplored despite its significance in shaping public perception and policy in the region. One of its critical understudied facets are euphemisms, which are heavily influenced by historical and social background and play a crucial role in moderating sensitive issues and managing communication across diverse societal norms. This study aims to fill this gap by identifying how euphemisms reflect and respond to South Africa's socio-cultural setting. The study involved compiling a corpus of approximately 500,000 words sourced from speeches, interviews, and publications by South African specialists with subsequent identification of euphemisms. As a results, 338 euphemisms were found in the corpus. Through continuous sampling, the study then identified, categorized, and quantitatively assessed the socio-cultural aspects of euphemisms across various economic discussions. According to the study results, euphemism in South African English economic discourse correspond to five main thematic groups: Economic and Racial Inequality, Corporate Governance and Ethics, Impact of Migration, Healthcare Economics, and Influence of Globalization. Each thematic group demonstrates patterns of euphemisms occurrence that reflect intentional communication efforts to address or mask sensitive socio-economic issues. The study results posit that euphemisms emerge as a frequently leveraged linguistic device moderating South African English economic discourse. They reflect an adaptive response to South Africa's socio-cultural setting where managing the multifaceted societal norms and historical sensitivities is imperative for effective communication and policy dissemination. The study argues for closer examination of the linguistic composition of South African English economic discourse. The findings contribute to the fields of sociolinguistics and intercultural communication as they expose how euphemisms function as a tool for managing complex socio-economic processes.

Keywords: *euphemism, South African English, economic discourse, socio-cultural analysis, political correctness*



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Эвфемизмы в южноафриканском варианте английского языка: социокультурные аспекты

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Аннотация

Экономический дискурс южноафриканского варианта английского языка остается недостаточно изученным, несмотря на его значимость в формировании общественного восприятия и политики в регионе. Одним из критически важных, но малоизученных, его компонентов являются эвфемизмы, которые в значительной степени подвержены влиянию исторических и социальных предпосылок и играют важную роль в модерировании деликатных вопросов и управлении коммуникацией в рамках различных общественных норм. Целью исследования является восполнение данного пробела путем выявления того, как эвфемизмы отражают социокультурный контекст Южной Африки и обуславливаются им. Авторы скомпилировали корпус текстов объемом около 500.000 слов, источником которого выступили публичные речи, интервью и публикации южноафриканских экономистов, и выявили 338 эвфемизмов. С использованием сплошной выборки в исследовании впоследствии были идентифицированы, категоризованы и подвергнуты количественной оценке социокультурные аспекты эвфемизмов в различных экономических дискуссиях. Согласно результатам исследования, эвфемизмы в южноафриканском варианте английского языка соотносятся с пятью основными тематическими группами: экономическое и расовое неравенство, корпоративное управление и этика, влияние миграции, экономика здравоохранения и влияние глобализации. Каждая тематическая группа отличается закономерностями функционирования эвфемизмов, которые отражают намеренные коммуникативные действия, направленные на обсуждение или маскировку чувствительных социально-экономических проблем. Результаты исследования подтверждают, что эвфемизмы выступают в качестве часто используемого лингвистического средства, модерировующего экономический дискурс южноафриканского варианта английского языка. Они являются инструментом адаптивного ответа на социокультурный контекст Южной Африки, где речевое регулирование многообразных социальных норм и исторически чувствительных аспектов является необходимым условием обеспечения эффективной коммуникации и формулирования управленческих решений. Исследование подчеркивает необходимость более детального изучения лингвистического состава экономического дискурса южноафриканского варианта английского языка. Результаты исследования вносят вклад в области социолингвистики и межкультурной коммуникации, раскрывая особенности функционирования эвфемизмов как инструмента управления сложными социально-экономическими процессами.

Ключевые слова: эвфемизм, южноафриканский вариант английского языка, экономический дискурс, социокультурный анализ, политическая корректность

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1. Introduction

This study explores euphemisms registered in South African English (SAE) economic discourse by examining how these linguistic tools are employed to construct communication in the socio-cultural setting of today's South African society. Among various linguistic phenomena, euphemisms in economic discourse are particularly notable for their capacity to conform communication to cultural and social norms. This is especially relevant in South Africa, where the economy is characterized by a blend of advanced industrial sectors and extensive informal markets, strongly influenced by the country's multilingualism and the pervasive legacy of its historical divisions. Euphemisms play a significant role in understanding communication strategies and social dynamics, particularly in the South African context, where managing diverse societal norms and historical sensitivities is crucial for effective communication and policy dissemination. Hence, we argue that a focus on SAE as a national variety of English may yield important observations exposing this complex socio-economic environment. As a bridge among the country's eleven official languages, SAE enables communication across linguistic barriers and transmits the cultural and social norms that are integral to economic discourse.

Although the linguistic composition of South African English has been a focus of researchers' attention (Rossouw & Naudé 2008, Deumert & Mabandla 2017, Bamgboşe 2019, among others), the role of euphemisms within SAE economic discourse has not been thoroughly examined. Studies such as those by Ndhlovu and Botha (2017), Epoge (2013) or Burns et al. (2024) have explored general language use and euphemisms in business and political contexts, but there remains a lack of specific data on how euphemisms function in economic discussions influenced by South Africa's unique socio-cultural background. The gap is particularly notable in the absence of detailed analysis on how these euphemisms affect public perception and policy formulation.

In light of the above, the study seeks to fill this gap and aims to identify and analyze the socio-cultural aspects of euphemisms used by South African economists in their professional public exchanges and consider how exactly euphemisms are employed in the coverage of economic issues against the backdrop of South Africa's socio-cultural background. Specifically, the study aims to address the following research questions:

1. What are the most common euphemisms used in SAE economic discourse?
2. How do these euphemisms reflect South Africa's socio-cultural setting?
3. What is the impact of euphemisms on the perception and communication of economic issues?

Importantly, euphemisms as language tools stand out for their ability to subtly influence perceptions and behaviors, which is why investigating how euphemisms are employed by economists can help identify the socio-cultural mechanisms that guide the choice of these linguistic strategies (Malyuga & Rimmer 2021). The expected findings will outline the practical implications, aiding economists and communication specialists in developing strategies that are effective within their socio-cultural frameworks. Furthermore, this research is anticipated to contribute observations essential to the fields of intercultural communication, sociolinguistics, and linguistic pragmatics, putting a focus on the role of language in professional settings shaped by socio-cultural influences. The novelty of this study thus lies in its comprehensive consideration of the socio-cultural aspects of euphemisms in a relatively understudied context of SAE economic discourse, intended to contribute to the fields of sociolinguistics and intercultural communication by exposing how euphemisms function as tools for managing complex socio-economic realities in South Africa.

2. Literature review

2.1. The socio-cultural dimension of euphemisms

Euphemism as a concept is deeply entrenched in both linguistic theory and sociolinguistic practice, serving as a bridge between language use and the socio-cultural contexts in which it operates. Euphemisms replace words or expressions that are socially stigmatized or deemed inappropriate, avoiding language that might be considered forbidden, indecent, or unacceptable by prevailing societal moral norms, or simply crude and tactless (Malyuga 2023, Malyuga & McCarthy 2021). This definition points to the socio-cultural determinism of euphemisms, illustrating that they carry an additional social weight. The emergence of euphemisms is influenced by the surrounding social conditions, which are in turn shaped by cultural norms and values within a society. Extralinguistic factors such as the context of the speech, national psychology, and established aesthetic and normative values are also of paramount importance in the formation of euphemisms (Chernyavskaya 2023, Sibul et al. 2019, Akopova 2023).

In economic discourse, euphemisms are generally employed for several specific purposes: (1) as a “psychological defense mechanism” to mitigate the negative perception of certain economic events, utilizing words with broad semantics (Lebedeva & Ponomarenko 2023); (2) as a form of information censorship, often stemming from a reluctance to use certain terms or expressions (Grishechko 2024); (3) to manipulate the recipient’s perception of information, persuading them of the validity of the speaker’s statements, aligning them with the speaker’s viewpoint, and cloaking unpleasant facts with neutral connotations (Akopova 2016); and (4) to adhere to social norms, ensuring politeness and tactfulness, thus fostering effective and conflict-free communication (Nakajima et al. 2023).

The socio-cultural approach to studying euphemisms is thus grounded in examining the role of euphemisms within specific cultural and social settings. According to this perspective, euphemisms are not just linguistic phenomena but also social instruments that reflect and reinforce cultural values and taboos (Petrosyan & Grishechko 2019). Exploring euphemisms through a socio-cultural lens enables a deeper comprehension of which subjects and issues are deemed inappropriate or taboo within a society. This approach helps identify the specific words and expressions that are employed to address these sensitive topics, as well as the pragmatic principles that govern the euphemisation process.

2.2. Previous studies on SAE economic discourse

SAE economic discourse is deeply interlaced with the country's socio-political history and its current multilingual and multicultural makeup. The literature on this subject spans several disciplines, including economics, sociology, and linguistics.

The historical context of South Africa has a profound impact on its economic discourse. The end of apartheid in 1994 marked a significant shift in economic policies and practices as it moved towards more inclusive economic strategies aimed at redressing past inequalities. Economic discourse has thus been affected by efforts to promote Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) and address disparities in wealth and opportunity. Scholars like Nattrass and Seekings (2005) have explored how these policies are discussed in economic terms, analyzing the euphemisms and coded language often leveraged to address sensitive issues related to race and economic inequality.

South Africa's linguistic scene is notably diverse, with eleven official languages that reflect its cultural heterogeneity. This multilingualism is bound to affect the nature of SAE economic discourse. Deumert and Mabandla (2017) discuss the implications of language choice in business and government communication and note that English often serves as the lingua franca in formal economic exchanges, despite not being the first language for the majority of South Africans. This scenario – where meanings can vary significantly across different linguistic contexts due to the dominance of a non-native lingua franca – complicates the communication process, including the use of euphemisms. Given this pronounced linguistic complexity, euphemisms in SAE economic discourse may be employed not only to soften or obscure harsh realities but also to manage the meanings and interpretations that arise in a multilingual context.

Corporate governance in South Africa has been a critical area of focus, especially post-apartheid, with significant literature examining how companies address ethical issues and social responsibility. Rossouw and Naudé (2008) investigate how corporate governance reforms post-1994 have influenced business practices and discourse. According to Ackers and Eccles (2015), the King Reports on corporate governance have also been instrumental in shaping the language and practices around corporate ethics, with special attention paid to transparency, accountability, and sustainability.

The discourse surrounding economic policies in South Africa is heavily influenced by ongoing debates about growth, development, and redistribution. Bamgboṣe (2019) examines the rhetoric used in discussing economic policies like the National Development Plan (NDP) and how these discussions reflect social expectations and political pressures. The NDP, a strategic initiative introduced in 2012, outlines a vision for eliminating poverty and reducing inequality by 2030 through inclusive economic growth, quality education, health care, and improved infrastructure. The NDP emphasizes sustainable development and social equity, making it a crucial document in understanding the current economic discourse. The language used in these policy discussions often incorporates rhetorical tools that reflect the tensions and compromises inherent in a society striving for both growth and equity (Grishechko 2023).

The language used in South African economic discussions about inequality is heavily influenced by political sensitivities and efforts to adhere to politically correct standards. For example, Mudau (2024) explores how terms like “previously disadvantaged” and “emerging middle class” are employed to deflect complex social sensitivities associated with discussing economic disparities. Such language is consistent with the ongoing struggles to address the realities of inequality without exacerbating social divisions.

The literature review thus points to the richness of SAE economic discourse and reveals an array of studies focused on its various aspects.

2.3. Existing research on euphemisms in SAE economic discourse

In South Africa, economic reforms have often been articulated through a vocabulary that reflects and constructs public perception and policy implementation. Hence, scholarly efforts had to be made to explain how euphemisms are employed in the discourse surrounding these reforms, particularly focusing on how they mediate the public’s understanding of potentially contentious economic changes.

Scholars (e.g. Ndhlovu & Botha 2017) have noted that post-apartheid economic policy discussions often use euphemisms to soften the impact of neoliberal policies and make debates on privatization and labor market flexibility more palatable. This strategy is evident in terms like “restructuring” instead of “downsizing” and “cost efficiency” instead of “cuts.” Ndhlovu and Botha (2017) argue that such euphemisms can lead to more favorable public responses to policies that might otherwise provoke resistance. Policymakers use softened language to increase acceptance of necessary but unpopular reforms, framing economic adjustments in a less threatening manner to maintain social stability during economic transitions (Eslami et al. 2023). The authors argue that using euphemisms raises concerns about transparency and accountability in governance. As euphemisms mask harsh realities, they can obscure the true impact of policies on individuals and communities, which may lead to a disconnect between government narratives and actual experiences. This gap can undermine trust in public

institutions and leaders. Additionally, euphemisms reinforce societal norms about acceptable discourse as they influence attitudes toward change and reform and affect perceptions of economic resilience or vulnerability. The study concludes that euphemisms must be balanced with transparency and genuine dialogue to keep the public truly informed and engaged.

The debate on land redistribution in South Africa often uses euphemisms to temper the discussion's emotional and political intensity. Koot et al. (2019) note that terms like "fairness" and "equity" are employed to engage stakeholders without causing discord. Such language moderates conversations around land reform, a proposed solution to historical injustices, encouraging consensus among varied groups, including those potentially negatively affected by reforms. Yet, these euphemisms, while promoting civility and inclusiveness, may mask the need for urgent, substantial changes to correct deep-rooted inequalities. Therefore, they risk reducing the impact of transformative policies. The authors believe that while moderating discourse is useful, it is important to ensure that significant issues are thoroughly acknowledged and addressed.

In discussions of SAE's economy during downturns, euphemisms such as "economic adjustment" or "fiscal realignment" are often used instead of the more dire term "crisis," as Epoge (2013) notes. These can be instrumental in calming markets and preventing panic, thereby maintaining a semblance of stability despite underlying economic issues. Although they are effective in short-term crisis management, they also can become a threat to transparency, potentially keeping the public uninformed about the real economic conditions. Epoge (2013) argues that while these euphemisms can temporarily ease market tensions, they need to be paired with transparent communication to encourage long-term trust the government and the people.

When it comes to economic sanctions and trade negotiations, euphemisms are employed in government and corporate communications to strike a careful balance. According to Burns et al. (2024), phrases such as "strategic partnerships" and "protective tariffs" serve to conceal the aggressive nature of trade protectionism and the underlying geopolitical objectives. These terms are deliberately chosen to "hide" the true intent and reasoning behind the actions being taken. This strategy helps present actions favorably, mitigating criticism from domestic and international stakeholders. Euphemisms smooth over the complexities of international trade as they frame aggressive measures as protective or strategic to create a cooperative image and reduce perceptions of conflict. This influences how policies are perceived internationally and domestically, often seen as necessary for national security rather than hostile acts. Burns et al. (2024) also posit that such linguistic choices impact diplomatic relations by softening rhetoric, maintaining diplomacy during contentious actions.

While literature review paints a vivid picture of the role that euphemisms play in constructing the narrative around economic policies and reforms in South Africa, notable gaps remain in the existing research, particularly regarding the systematic

analysis of how and which of these euphemisms most prominently reflect the South African socio-cultural background. There is a marked absence of structured data on which socio-cultural aspects are most markedly reflected in the use of economic euphemisms in SAE, and this research gap points to the need for an empirical study that can statistically examine the influence and prevalence of specific socio-cultural factors in the use of euphemisms within SAE economic discourse.

3. Materials and methods

To construct a representative corpus of SAE economic discourse, we employed purposive sampling to select texts that provided a broad overview of the economic issues. The authors compiled a corpus of approximately 500,000 words with a total of 338 euphemisms identified. The corpus was drawn from various sources, including speeches and interviews (public addresses and interviews with prominent South African economists at forums such as economic summits and university lectures) and publications (opinion pieces, editorials, and articles from major South African newspapers and online news portals, chosen for their focus on significant economic issues and influence on public economic discourse).

The selection was guided by several specific criteria aimed at maximizing relevance to South African economic discourse and the prevalence of euphemisms, including relevance to key economic topics (policy impacts, market trends, socio-economic growth), influence of speaker or publication (speeches and quotes from esteemed economists and authoritative media), and diversity of perspectives (the corpus was built with a diverse range of sources, including government, private sector, and academic perspectives).

The initial statistical analysis identified the most frequently occurring euphemisms related to socio-cultural themes. This involved identifying euphemisms through a process of manual coding, whereby each instance of euphemistic language was tagged and categorized into thematic groups based on the socio-economic context they addressed. The frequency of occurrence of euphemisms belonging to different categories was calculated to determine the prominence of the themes within the corpus. Following the identification of prevalent themes, a detailed analysis was undertaken on the most frequently observed topics. This phase involved examining how euphemisms were employed to address these topics. The analysis aimed to interpret the socio-cultural aspects of these euphemisms, considering how they contribute to constructing economic discourse and the implications for intercultural communication in South African setting.

The study recognizes potential limitations such as the interpretative nature of analyzing euphemisms and the possible incompleteness of the corpus. While efforts were made to compile a comprehensive dataset, the selected speeches and quotes may not encompass all economic discussions, or the full range of euphemistic language employed across all sectors of the economy. To mitigate these limitations, efforts were made to include a variety of sources, from academic lectures to

business magazines, ensuring a broad spectrum of economic discussions is represented. The sampling criteria were also periodically reviewed and adjusted in response to preliminary analysis results, which helped in identifying and including underrepresented themes or sectors.

4. Study results

The quantitative analysis of the corpus revealed five prevalent thematic groups where euphemisms are prominently registered in SAE economic discourse, namely (1) Economic and Racial Inequality, (2) Corporate Governance and Ethics, (3) Impact of Migration, (4) Healthcare Economics, and (5) Influence of Globalization. Each thematic group has shown varying levels of prevalence reflecting distinct socio-cultural aspects within the South African context (Figure 1).

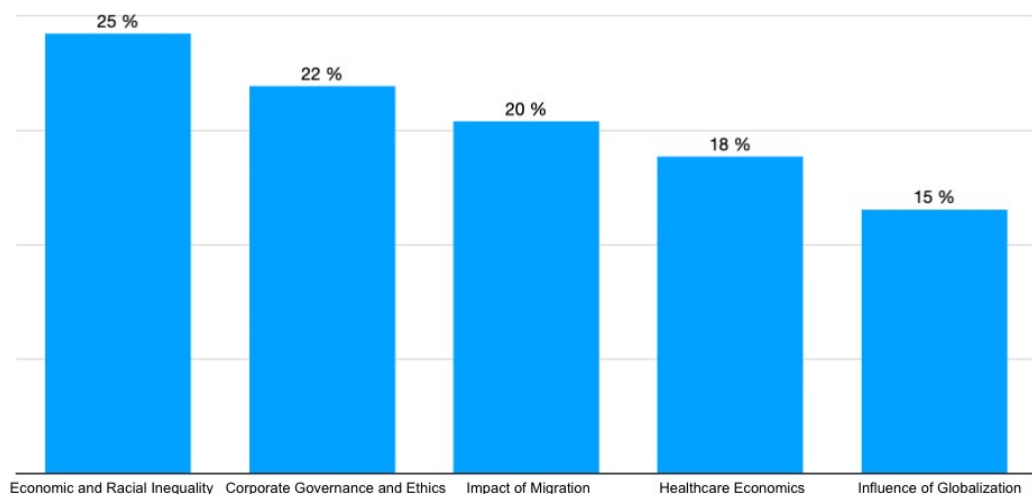


Figure 1. Statistical distribution of the most frequent socio-cultural thematic groups of euphemisms registered in SAE economic discourse

The distribution of euphemisms across various sectors of SAE economic discourse reveals a purposeful deployment aligned with prevalent socio-economic challenges and priorities. Euphemisms addressing Economic and Racial Inequality are most common, comprising 25% of instances (250 occurrences, $n = 83$), attesting to the significant focus on rectifying historical disparities. Corporate Governance and Ethics follow closely at 22% (220 occurrences, $n = 75$), which indicates a strong emphasis on ethical business practices in post-apartheid South Africa. The Impact of Migration and Healthcare Economics also show substantial representation at 20% (200 occurrences, $n = 68$) and 18% (180 occurrences, $n = 59$) respectively, bringing to the fore the social and economic implications of migration and healthcare policy. The Influence of Globalization, though less frequent at 15% (150 occurrences, $n = 53$), demonstrates how global economic interactions affect

local economic narratives. This distribution illustrates the prominent place of euphemisms in SAE economic discourse, as they serve as tools for both communication and cultural adaptation against the complex South African socio-economic background.

5. Discussion

5.1. Economic and Racial Inequality thematic group

In the corpus examined, euphemisms related to economic inequality have been registered in discussions surrounding policies aimed at rectifying the historical disparities in South Africa. These linguistic choices are not merely stylistic but are essential in moderating politically sensitive and socially charged atmosphere of economic reform. They serve to frame economic initiatives in a manner that is palatable to a diverse populace, hence proving productive for smoother public and political engagement. Table 1 below outlines some of the examples found in this group followed by the analysis of their socio-cultural aspects in the South African context.

Table 1. Examples of euphemisms registered in the Economic and Racial Inequality thematic group

Euphemisms	Socio-cultural aspects in the South African context
Previously disadvantaged	The euphemism occurred in the corpus to avoid directly mentioning racial groups that were marginalized under apartheid. Its purpose was to shift the focus from race to a state of being, implying a past condition that policies are now attempting to amend. The euphemism has been found productive for framing policy discussions in a non-divisive manner, creating a sense of historical acknowledgment and ongoing correction without invoking racial tensions directly.
Emerging middle class	In the corpus, the euphemism was employed to describe the socioeconomic ascent of individuals from lower economic strata to gloss over the continuing struggles that many South Africans face despite economic advances. It was wielded to promote a narrative of progress and economic mobility, which can both inspire hope and obscure the stagnation and regression experienced by segments of the population not rising with the economic tide.
Economic empowerment	Employed in lieu of direct references to racial quotas or affirmative action, this euphemism helped frame policies in positive, inclusive terms. It suggested enhancement and capacity-building, diverting attention from the racial undertones and potential controversy around preferential policies. In the corpus, the euphemism was leveraged by policymakers to advocate for necessary reforms while minimizing backlash.
Growth through redistribution	In the corpus, the occurrence of this euphemism was associated with the description of economic strategies intended to decrease wealth disparities. By avoiding direct mention of the potential negative impacts on wealthier individuals or sectors, the term “redistribution” was softened via “growth through”, which connotes positive development and mutual benefit, rather than loss.
Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE)	Rather than explicitly stating racial targets, this euphemism encompasses a broader, more inclusive approach to empowerment. It implies a collective uplift of black South Africans but has been critiqued for its vague application and the slow pace of actual economic equality it has brought about.

Euphemisms	Socio-cultural aspects in the South African context
Transformation	The euphemism was registered in the corpus when referring to the overhaul of societal structures and institutions to be more representative of the demographic makeup of South Africa. While it suggests progressive change, it was exploited to mask the slow progress and persistent inequalities in various sectors, from education to employment.
Fiscal realignment	The euphemism was employed in the corpus to describe budget cuts or reallocations that disproportionately affect underprivileged communities. It helped soften the impact of the term “cuts” to suggest a thoughtful, necessary adjustment rather than austerity. Employing the euphemism, policymakers presented these changes as part of broader economic strategies aimed at stabilizing the national economy, rather than reductions that could hinder service delivery to already struggling populations.
Land redistribution	The euphemism occurred in discussions about the sensitive and controversial matter of land ownership in South Africa, a remnant of apartheid, during which the white minority held most of the land. “Redistribution” is used instead of “confiscation” or “repossession”. This choice of language portrays the policy as a fair and just attempt to address historical wrongs without inflaming racial tensions. The euphemism helped maintain a balance between redressing past inequalities and promoting unity.
Affordable access	When discussing pricing policies for crucial services such as electricity, water, and education, the term “affordable access” was employed as a euphemism. This phrase addressed the issue of delivering these services to economically diverse populations. Though it suggested fairness and social justice, it also served to conceal the shortcomings in both the availability and quality of services offered to lower-income communities. In the corpus, the euphemism was employed to quell discontent regarding the rising cost of living without making substantial changes to pricing structures.
Skills development	While “skills development” is ostensibly a positive and empowering concept, in the context of economic inequality, it was registered as a euphemism for programs aimed at addressing the employment gap between different racial and economic groups without tackling the systemic barriers that perpetuate these disparities. Used in this vein, it shifted the focus to the individual’s need to adapt and upgrade, potentially diverting attention from the need for structural changes in the education and labor markets.

The prevalence of these euphemisms, constituting 25% of the corpus, points to their purposeful incorporation to maintain social harmony and political correctness. Their frequent occurrence reflects the ongoing sensitivity around racial and economic issues in SAE economic discourse and accentuates the role of language in constructing the narrative of economic reform.

5.2. Corporate Governance and Ethics thematic group

In the thematic group of Corporate Governance and Ethics, the study has identified euphemisms that play a significant role in moderating discussions around sensitive corporate practices and ethical considerations in South Africa. These euphemisms serve to manage the complex sphere of post-apartheid corporate responsibility and governance, often masking the harsh realities of corporate

misconduct while promoting an image of integrity and responsibility. These linguistic strategies testify to a fine line between transparency and the preservation of corporate reputation, which is critical for maintaining investor confidence and regulatory compliance. Below, Table 2 presents the key euphemisms found in this group, followed by an analysis of their socio-cultural aspects in SAE economic discourse.

Table 2. Examples of euphemisms registered in the Corporate Governance and Ethics thematic group

Euphemisms	Socio-cultural aspects in the South African context
Strategic misalignment	The term “strategic misalignment” was used in the situation of diplomatically addressing failures without directly implicating leadership skills or ethical decision-making. This euphemism diluted the perception of mismanagement, reflecting a cultural avoidance of direct confrontation in corporate environments. This is particularly prevalent in the South African context where maintaining corporate image is imperative for investor confidence.
Creative accounting	The euphemism was applied to practices bordering on the unethical, recasting potentially fraudulent activities as innovative financial management. The euphemism registered in the corpus reflected a broader socio-cultural tendency to reframe contentious practices in a positive light, which is significant in a country grappling with corruption and striving to boost transparency in business practices.
Optimizing operational efficiency	This euphemism was employed in discussions about cost-cutting measures that result in job losses, discovered through our analysis. It focused on the positive aspects of efficiency rather than the socioeconomic impact of reduced employment, which is a sensitive issue in South Africa with its high unemployment rates. The euphemism served to soften the impact of such measures in corporate communications, aligning with societal norms that favor stability and gradual change.
Corporate rightsizing	“Corporate rightsizing” appeared in the corpus as a euphemism for workforce reductions. It was presented positively, suggesting improvements in structural efficiency rather than focusing on job losses. The euphemism downplays the social turmoil linked to job cuts to fit the stories of business sustainability and growth during times of economic change.
Enhanced executive compensation	This euphemism was used to justify high executive pay in the corpus, bringing to light the need to attract talent while downplaying the stark wage disparities this creates. In a country with significant income inequality, such as South Africa, this euphemism helps manage public and stakeholder perceptions by focusing on competitiveness and organizational success instead of exacerbating tensions over economic disparities.

The analysis of these euphemisms, which collectively constitute 22% of the thematic instances in our corpus, indicates a tactical employment designed to uphold social harmony and adhere to norms of political correctness within the economic sphere. Their frequent application reveals the persistent sensitivities around corporate governance and ethical issues and lays an emphasis on the role of language in constructing perceptions in corporate ethics. This examination has specified the linguistic strategies harnessed to address corporate governance issues in South Africa’s socio-cultural setting.

5.3. Impact of Migration thematic group

In addressing the theme of migration, the study has identified specific euphemisms employed in SAE economic discourse to discuss the impacts of both internal and cross-border migration. These linguistic choices are not arbitrary and are crafted to address sensitive aspects of migration, balancing the tensions between economic necessity and societal integration. These euphemisms bear testimony to a careful approach to discussing the contributions and challenges posed by migrants, in a country where migration dynamics are closely tied to economic opportunities and social cohesion. Table 3 presents the key euphemisms extracted from the corpus.

Table 3. Examples of euphemisms registered in the Impact of Migration thematic group

Euphemisms	Socio-cultural aspects in the South African context
Labor flexibility	The euphemism surfaced in discussions on migration-related employment policies, masking the precarious nature of migrant labor, particularly the employment of migrants in sectors characterized by instability and low wages. In SAE economic discourse, “labor flexibility” positively framed the economic adaptation to migrant workforces, minimizing the focus on the often-exploitative conditions, aligning with national narratives that promote economic resilience and adaptability.
Cultural exchange	This euphemism was employed to describe the movement of people across borders, emphasizing the mutual benefits of cultural diversity rather than the challenges of integration and resource allocation. In a South African context, where xenophobia has been a recurrent issue, framing migration as a “cultural exchange” helps mitigate potential social tensions by putting emphasis on positive interactions and contributions rather than competition for scarce resources.
Workforce diversification	This euphemism was employed to discuss the inclusion of migrants in the workforce and suggested a strategic enhancement of the labor pool, which, as revealed by the corpus, served to obscure the socio-economic pressures and occasional community resistance to migrant workers. In SAE economic discourse, “workforce diversification” has been found to align with policies aimed at social integration while deflecting from the complexities and frictions involved.
Population mobility	As a substitute to “migration” or “immigration”, “population mobility” was found in the corpus to diffuse the sometimes-negative connotations associated with migration. It provided a neutral or even positive spin on the movement of people, pertinent in contexts where migration is seen as a threat to job security for locals. In SAE economic discourse, this euphemism was found to soften public discourse, framing migration as a normal and beneficial part of global dynamics.
Economic integration	This euphemism was registered in the corpus in contexts related to the economic assimilation of migrants into local economies. The study revealed its application as a way to focus on the economic potential of migrants rather than the challenges or costs of integration. In South Africa, where economic inequality and joblessness are major concerns, the term “economic integration” is used to frame migration as advantageous to the national economy. This helps encourage acceptance and backing for migration policies, presenting them in a positive light.

The analysis based on the corpus data has illustrated the specific euphemisms used and specified their applications in the socio-economic debates surrounding

migration in South Africa. These euphemisms reflect the effort to balance economic benefits with social challenges, illustrating the role of language in forming policy discourse in areas critical to national development and social harmony.

5.4. Healthcare Economics thematic group

The theme of Healthcare Economics has revealed how euphemisms are employed in SAE economic discourse to address the issues surrounding healthcare financing, access, and policy changes. These linguistic choices managed the discussions that are tied to the well-being of the populace and are highly sensitive due to the potential life-or-death consequences. These euphemisms serve to moderate the impact of policy shifts and funding changes on public perception, particularly in a country grappling with significant health disparities and ongoing public health challenges. Table 4 below offers critical assessment of the key euphemisms of this thematic group identified in the corpus.

Table 4. Examples of euphemisms registered in the Healthcare Economics thematic group

Euphemisms	Socio-cultural aspects in the South African context
Resource reallocation	The euphemism occurred to describe the redirection of healthcare funding. It appeared in policy discussions where budget cuts were reframed as strategic adjustments. In SAE economic discourse, “resource reallocation” was employed to downplay reductions in healthcare spending, which could be controversial given the country’s high burden of diseases like HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis. This framing helped to mitigate public concern over potential service degradation.
Service optimization	Found in discussions about restructuring healthcare services, this euphemism referred to efforts to improve efficiency but could also entail service reduction or facility closures. In South Africa, where healthcare access is a significant concern, the phrase “service optimization” implies enhancements and advancements. However, this term can obscure the potential drawbacks, particularly the negative effects on healthcare availability in rural or underserved regions.
Fiscal prudence in healthcare	In the corpus, the euphemism justified stringent budgeting measures within the healthcare sector. It portrayed budget cuts as responsible financial stewardship, which, as revealed by the study, served to align public understanding with the narrative of necessary austerity for long-term sustainability. The euphemism is particularly potent in South Africa, where fiscal constraints are often cited as reasons for limited healthcare funding.
Patient contribution enhancement	Instead of directly mentioning increases in patient fees, this euphemism was employed to frame additional costs to patients as enhancements or contributions to healthcare services. This term helps soften the blow of rising healthcare costs, promoting them as part of collective efforts to maintain quality healthcare services in the face of economic challenges.
Healthcare access leveling	The euphemism appeared in discussions about healthcare equity, leveraged to describe policies aimed at reducing the gap in healthcare access between different socio-economic groups. In the corpus, it was employed to promote a narrative of fairness and equity, while potentially masking the complexities involved in actually achieving this goal in diverse and economically disparate communities across South Africa.

The exploration of these euphemisms through the study’s analysis has demonstrated their employment in SAE economic discourse and has exposed their outstanding role in mediating the potentially divisive impacts of healthcare policy and funding decisions. In South Africa, where healthcare is a critical issue interconnected with socio-economic conditions, these euphemisms were effective in managing the tenuous equilibrium between fiscal responsibility and the need to provide adequate health services.

5.5. Influence of Globalization thematic group

The analysis of euphemisms related to the Influence of Globalization in the corpus has demonstrated how such linguistic strategies are adopted to manage discussions surrounding global economic integration and its effects on South African economic policies and practices. These euphemisms framed international economic challenges and opportunities in ways that were palatable to a local audience, potentially masking the difficulties and adjustments required by globalization. Table 5 below provides key examples identified in the corpus, along with the analysis of their socio-cultural aspects in the South African context.

Table 5. Examples of euphemisms registered in the Influence of Globalization thematic group

Euphemisms	Socio-cultural aspects in the South African context
Market adjustment	The euphemism surfaced in discussions about the impact of global market fluctuations on the South African economy. It was employed to describe layoffs or downsizing without directly attributing these actions to external global pressures. The study found that using the term “market adjustment” was a common way to ease public fears about job security. It framed economic changes as natural responses to global trends and steered the conversation away from any domestic policy failures.
Strategic partnerships	Wielded to refer to foreign investments or trade agreements that may be controversial, this euphemism helped to posit such arrangements in a positive light. It glossed over the potential for economic dependency or uneven benefits. In South Africa, where foreign economic influence is a sensitive issue, “strategic partnerships” were presented as mutually beneficial, diverting attention from any sovereignty concerns or economic imbalances that might arise.
Fiscal realignment	The euphemism appeared in contexts where economic policies were adjusted to align with global economic trends, often involving austerity measures or budget cuts. In the SAE economic discourse, “fiscal realignment” was framed as a proactive and prudent measure, softening the perception of these adjustments as responses to external pressures or as concessions in international negotiations.
Competitiveness enhancement	Used in reference to regulatory or policy changes aimed at improving the global market position of South African industries, this euphemism masked the potential downsides, such as increased pressure on local businesses and workers. It was portrayed as an initiative for growth, rather than a reaction to global competitive threats. Our analysis indicates that this framing is key to maintaining support for policies that may have challenging domestic impacts.

Euphemisms	Socio-cultural aspects in the South African context
Trade adjustment	The euphemism surfaced in the context of discussions revolving around the adaptation of trade policies in response to global economic conditions. It was leveraged to describe measures that protect local industries from foreign competition, which might otherwise be viewed as protectionism. “Trade adjustment” was presented as a necessary step for economic stability with a focus on resilience. At the same time, any negative implications for free trade and international relations were being downplayed.

These euphemisms, identified through the study’s analysis, are a clear evidence of how language is used to construct public and political discourse around globalization in South Africa. They emerge as tools that contextualize global economic trends within the national economic narrative and cushion the impact of these trends on public perception. As policymakers frame international economic challenges in this vein, they can align global dynamics with local expectations and values, calling attention to adaptability and strategic foresight in the face of global change.

6. Critical observations and implications

The primary aim of this study was to analyze the socio-cultural aspects of euphemisms in SAE economic discourse. The research has identified that euphemisms in SAE economic discourse are prominently categorized into five thematic groups: Economic and Racial Inequality, Corporate Governance and Ethics, Impact of Migration, Healthcare Economics, and Influence of Globalization. These findings support the hypothesis that euphemisms serve critical communicative roles reflective of South Africa’s unique socio-cultural background and mitigating negative reactions to economic realities. The prevalence of these euphemisms testifies to their productive power to moderate discussions on sensitive issues and support smoother communication in a multilingual and multicultural context.

The findings of this study align with existing literature on the socio-cultural dimensions of euphemisms, particularly in how they align speech with social and cultural expectations to soften potentially sensitive content. Previous studies have postulated that euphemisms serve as psychological defense mechanisms, tools for information censorship, and means of manipulating perception, all of which were evident in our analysis of SAE economic discourse. For instance, the frequent use of terms like “previously disadvantaged” and “emerging middle class” in discussing economic inequality echoes Lebedeva and Ponomarenko’s (2023) findings on the socio-cultural basis of euphemistic language.

The findings of this study on the socio-cultural aspects of euphemisms in SAE economic discourse align with and expand upon Mudau’s (2024) research on political euphemisms in Tshivenda. Mudau’s (2024) work, which examines how political euphemisms are deployed to moderate harsh topics and make conversations more acceptable, provides a framework for comprehending the capacity of euphemistic framing in economic discourse. The author’s analysis of

political euphemisms in Tshivenda reveals that these expressions manage face-threatening acts and help maintain social harmony. Similarly, the present study on SAE economic discourse demonstrates that euphemisms serve to moderate discussions on sensitive socio-economic issues, such as economic inequality, corporate governance, migration, healthcare, and globalization, by framing them in less confrontational terms. For instance, Mudau's (2024) discussion of euphemisms like "vhatu vha sa koni" (*indigent people*) and "vhatu vha miholo ya fhasi" (*low-income earners*) parallels the use of terms like "labor flexibility" and "cultural exchange" in SAE economic discourse. Both sets of euphemisms serve to cushion the impact of discussing challenges posed by migration to facilitate more palatable and less divisive public discourse.

Mudau (2024) identifies several linguistic strategies used to form political euphemisms, including understatement, compounding, and circumlocution. These strategies are also evident in the formation of economic euphemisms in SAE. For example, the use of "fiscal realignment" to describe budget cuts or "corporate rightsizing" for layoffs mirrors the understatement and circumlocution strategies observed in Tshivenda political euphemisms. These techniques are put in place to offset the negative connotations of economic measures and maintain a positive public image.

Both studies put a focus on the importance of politeness and pragmatic considerations in the use of euphemisms. Mudau's (2024) application of politeness theory illustrates how political euphemisms are wielded to avoid direct confrontation and preserve the dignity of the interlocutors. In SAE economic discourse, euphemisms similarly function to traverse socio-cultural sensitivities and promote effective communication. For example, terms like "service optimization" and "economic empowerment" are embraced to present potentially contentious policies in a more acceptable light, aligning with societal expectations of politeness and respect.

Our study's exploration of euphemisms within the Healthcare Economics thematic group in SAE economic discourse finds notable parallels with the findings of Batibo and Kopi's (2008) research on sex-related euphemisms in Setswana, particularly in the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Batibo and Kopi's (2008) study posits that euphemisms are extensively leveraged to "dodge" sensitive and often stigmatized topics surrounding sexual health and diseases, including HIV/AIDS, to mitigate embarrassment and maintain social decorum, which is critical in public health communication. Similarly, our analysis identified that euphemisms within the Healthcare Economics thematic group in SAE economic discourse function to scale down the presentation of healthcare issues, such as budget cuts and resource allocation, making them more palatable to the public. For instance, terms like "patient contribution enhancement" and "healthcare access leveling" are incorporated into the discourse to describe cuts and efficiency measures in the healthcare sector without triggering public alarm or negative backlash. This aligns with Batibo and Kopi's (2008) observation that HIV euphemisms in Setswana serve to lessen the harshness of the discourse surrounding

the disease, bringing about more open and less stigmatized communication. Both studies discuss the role of euphemisms as essential tools for managing public perception and communication in sensitive areas. In the case of our study, the use of healthcare-related euphemisms in SAE economic discourse exposes the importance of framing economic decisions in a manner that maintains public trust and minimizes social unrest. This intentional use of language brings attention to a broader cultural need to handle sensitive topics with care and tact, mirroring the linguistic adaptations observed in Setswana to address the socio-cultural aspects of health and disease.

The study's findings on the socio-cultural aspects of euphemisms in SAE economic discourse, particularly within the thematic group of Corporate Governance and Ethics, can be contextualized against Polzenhagen and Wolf's (2021) research on culture-specific conceptualizations of corruption in African English. Their analysis explains how cultural models and conceptual metaphors in African English are employed to euphemize and, thereby, obscure the illicit nature of corrupt practices. These metaphors often involve culturally familiar and less confrontational terms, echoing deeply embedded cultural practices like gift-giving and negotiating. In the context of Corporate Governance and Ethics, our study found that euphemisms such as "corporate restructuring" and "ethical realignment" can frame potentially negative corporate behaviors, such as layoffs and compliance failures, in a more positive light. This mirrors the use of euphemistic language in the conceptualization of corruption in African English, where terms like "gift-giving" and "favours" are used to disguise bribery and favoritism. Both studies thus expose the functional load of euphemisms as mitigators of the negative connotations associated with these practices, making them more socially acceptable and less likely to provoke public outrage.

Furthermore, Polzenhagen and Wolf (2021) discuss cultural models, such as the kinship-based community model, in shaping the understanding and communication of corruption. This model, which involves reciprocal duties and nurturing within a community, can be seen in how corporate euphemisms in SAE economic discourse are framed. Terms like "corporate citizenship" and "stakeholder engagement" suggest a sense of communal responsibility and ethical behavior, even when underlying actions may contradict these ideals. This cultural framing aligns with African cultural practices that prioritize community cohesion and mutual support, thus ensuring that corporate actions are perceived as being in line with societal values and expectations.

The study by Beaugrande and Williams' (2002) analyzes the South African Corpus of English to interpret the language's role in negotiating social realities, particularly in the evolving discourse of democracy in post-apartheid South Africa. The authors argue that public discourse in South Africa is marked by contested terms that serve different ideological purposes, with "democracy" being a prime example of a term with multiple, often conflicting, meanings. This perspective aligns with our study's findings that euphemisms in SAE economic discourse similarly reflect the complex socio-political backdrop of South Africa. Just as

“democracy” can signify various incompatible ideals, euphemisms in economic discourse serve to mediate sensitive socio-economic realities. For instance, terms like “economic empowerment” and “fiscal realignment” in SAE frame economic policies in ways that are consistent with common societal values of progress and stability, while softening the impact of potentially contentious measures. Thus, a smoother public discourse is being created, much like the diverse interpretations of “democracy” help manage ideological tensions in the public sphere.

Furthermore, Beaugrande and Williams (2002) argue that language should be seen as a constantly evolving entity shaped by social practices and interactions. Our study echoes this by illustrating how euphemisms in SAE economic discourse are not static but adapt to the changing socio-economic and political context. The employment of euphemisms reflects ongoing negotiations of meaning and power, serving as tools for maintaining social cohesion and managing public perception.

The findings of our study on euphemistic language use in SAE economic discourse align with the patterns of discursive strategies discussed in Ndhlovu’s (2019) research on South Africa’s social transformation policies. Ndhlovu (2019) focuses on the neoliberal foundations and raciolinguistic ideologies present in policies like Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) and land reform. Our study similarly reveals that euphemisms in SAE economic discourse often mask underlying socio-economic inequalities and reflect a neoliberal agenda that prioritizes market-led economic rationalism over substantive social transformation. For instance, Ndhlovu’s (2019) analysis shows how the language of B-BBEE and land reform is laden with neoliberal jargon that enforces economic empowerment within a market framework, while neglecting the cultural and social dimensions vital to genuine empowerment. Our findings show that euphemisms like “economic empowerment” and “market access” often mask structural inequalities under a guise of progress. This aligns the discourse with a global neoliberal paradigm that Ndhlovu (2019) criticizes for neglecting the realities of marginalized South African communities.

Ndhlovu (2019) emphasizes the neglect of marginalized black South Africans by neoliberal policies. This concern aligns with our study’s observation of a mismatch between economic terminology and actual experiences. Collectively, both works urge the adoption of policies that are true to the diverse socio-cultural background of South Africa.

Our study corroborates Mabela et al.’s (2020) analysis of South African political rhetoric, as it illustrates how politicians use language to influence public opinion, often with the aid of euphemisms and selective phrasing to smooth over divisive issues. We noted comparable language patterns in addressing themes such as Economic and Racial Inequality and Migration. Terms like “previously disadvantaged” and “emerging markets” temper the discussion of sharp socio-economic contrasts. This mirrors Mabela et al.’s findings on how leaders choose their language to put a positive spin on their agendas, as demonstrated by Jacob Zuma’s speeches, which frequently emphasize unity and progress while understating broader challenges.

Furthermore, our thematic group on the Influence of Globalization shows how terms like “global competitiveness” and “market alignment” are used to frame economic policies within a favorable paradigm, subtly endorsing market-led growth strategies. This reflects the discursive strategies identified by Mabela et al. (2020), where language is crafted to resonate with both national and global audiences, promoting an image of progress and alignment with global standards. This strategic use of language not only influences public perception but also aligns with the political leaders’ need to maintain power and support, as discussed in Mabela et al.’s (2020) research.

Thus, this study echoes existing research on the intentional use of euphemisms in language to manage public perception and navigate sensitive socio-political issues. However, it adds a unique dimension by focusing specifically on SAE economic discourse. By statistically categorizing the most prominent thematic groups – Economic and Racial Inequality, Corporate Governance and Ethics, Impact of Migration, Healthcare Economics, and Influence of Globalization – this research exposes the prevalence and intentional use of euphemistic language within these themes. Our findings reinforce the established understanding of euphemisms as critical tools for mitigating the impact of harsh economic realities and provide an empirical analysis that expands the discourse on how language shapes economic narratives in a culturally diverse and politically complex society like South Africa. Future research should explore the use of euphemisms in other aspects of SAE economic discourse, such as environmental policy and education. Investigating how euphemisms function in different socio-economic contexts within South Africa could be instrumental in interpreting their role in public discourse. Additionally, comparative studies between South African English and other national varieties of English could reveal broader patterns and cultural specificities in the use of euphemistic language. Further examination of the ethical implications of euphemisms in economic discourse is also warranted, balancing the need for effective communication with transparency and accountability.

7. Conclusion

This study filled a crucial gap in understanding how euphemisms in South African English economic discourse reflect and shape South Africa’s socio-cultural setting. The study demonstrated that euphemisms are frequently used in South African economic discussions to cushion sensitive topics influenced by socio-cultural factors. Key themes where euphemisms are prevalent include economic and racial inequality, corporate governance, migration, healthcare, and globalization. In the context of these themes, euphemisms helped moderate discussions and tailor communication strategies within a multicultural framework. The findings exposed the roles and impacts of euphemisms in South African English economic discourse and can be useful in the development of communication practices that align with South Africa’s cultural norms and support effective policy-making and public engagement. Future research should expand on

these observations and apply similar linguistic analyses in other contexts to expand the knowledge of global economic discourse.

For policymakers, economists, and communication experts in South Africa and similar multicultural societies, these findings have several implications, as they can help create more effective communication strategies that respect socio-cultural contexts, reduce miscommunications and conflicts, and move towards the adoption of transparent yet culturally sensitive discourse strategies.

Additionally, the study contributes to sociolinguistics and intercultural communication as it demonstrates how euphemisms manage complex socio-economic realities. Special emphasis is put on the importance of language in shaping economic perceptions and outcomes, affecting societal well-being. This research opens avenues for further exploration of how language reflects and forms socio-economic policies in different regions and economic contexts. It also invites discussion on the ethical implications of using euphemisms in economic discourse, balancing transparency with sensitivity – an essential consideration for economists, policymakers, and communicators worldwide.

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