

# Euphemisms of Disability in Russian and English within Contemporary Public Communication

Nuraliyeva Shokhistakhon Abdusalomovna

Lecturer, Fergana State University

## Abstract

The article examines euphemisms used to name disability in Russian and English and interprets them as culturally sensitive linguistic tools that mediate between social norms, institutional regulation and personal identity. Drawing on pragmatics, sociolinguistics, linguistic politeness theory and disability studies, the research analyses how euphemistic nominations emerge, stabilise and shift across media discourse, legal and bureaucratic communication, education, and everyday interaction. The study compares the dominant euphemistic strategies in both languages and shows that disability naming tends to move from direct stigmatized labels to person oriented and rights oriented forms, while simultaneously generating new cycles of avoidance, abstraction and bureaucratisation. The empirical basis consists of illustrative examples from contemporary Russian and English public texts, including official documents, journalistic materials and public awareness communication. The analysis demonstrates that euphemisms of disability form a layered system in which lexical choice reflects competing ideologies, including person first versus identity first language, medical versus social models of disability, and charity narratives versus inclusion narratives. It is argued that euphemisms do not merely soften meaning but actively participate in constructing social reality, shaping attitudes to difference, normality and participation. In the context of globalisation and digital media, disability euphemisms circulate across languages, producing convergence in polite formulas but also local divergences rooted in distinct institutional histories and cultural expectations.

**Keywords:** euphemism, disability, Russian, English, stigma, politeness, person first language, identity, media discourse, inclusive communication

## Introduction

Disability is among the most socially sensitive domains of naming. In many communities, direct labels for disability easily become carriers of stigma, pity, fear or social distancing. As a result, languages develop euphemistic ways of speaking that attempt to reduce offence, protect the interlocutor's social face, and signal alignment with contemporary ethical norms. In linguistic terms, euphemisms can be understood not simply as "nicer words" but as pragmatic instruments that regulate interaction, distribute social roles and index values shared by a group. Euphemisms arise where speakers perceive a conflict between the need to refer and the risk of causing harm, embarrassment, or moral blame, and disability discourse provides a clear environment for such conflicts [1–4].

At the same time, disability naming is not a purely interpersonal matter. It is shaped by institutions, legislation, educational policy, medical documentation, media standards and activist movements. The term used in an official form, a school document or a television report becomes part of a broader cultural script of how disability is understood, whether as an individual deficit, a medical condition, a social barrier, or a legitimate identity. Therefore, euphemisms of disability can be approached as symbolic forms that condense collective experience and represent shifting cultural models of inclusion and normality [3–6].

Russian and English offer a productive comparison. Both languages have experienced strong pressures toward "inclusive" and "non discriminatory" naming, yet their trajectories differ in institutional

vocabulary, dominant euphemistic mechanisms and ideological debates. English public discourse has long oscillated between person first formulas such as “person with a disability” and identity first formulas such as “disabled person”, while Russian discourse more often balances between everyday lexemes such as “инвалид” and administrative, educational and medical euphemisms such as “лицо с инвалидностью”, “человек с инвалидностью”, “лицо с ограниченными возможностями здоровья”, “ребёнок с ОВЗ”, “маломобильные граждане” and related forms. These options may look interchangeable, yet they index different frames, including rights, welfare, pathology, charity and social hierarchy.

The relevance of this research is explained by several factors. First, global media, translation and international policy discourse intensify contact between Russian and English naming conventions, producing borrowings, calques and hybrid formulas. Second, in both linguistic communities, disability is increasingly visible in public communication, from accessibility campaigns to inclusive education and workplace diversity. Third, the constant renewal of polite terms creates a phenomenon often described as a euphemistic cycle, where a new neutral designation may gradually accumulate negative connotations and be replaced again [2; 4; 7]. This cycle is especially evident in disability lexicon, where social attitudes and institutional practices change faster than stable everyday habits.

The aim of this article is to examine euphemisms of disability in Russian and English, focusing on their pragmatic motivations, structural patterns, functional diversity and discourse distribution. The study addresses the following questions

1. what euphemistic strategies dominate in Russian and English disability naming

2. how do euphemisms function as markers of identity, politeness and institutional regulation

3. how are traditional and bureaucratic euphemisms reinterpreted in contemporary media and digital communication

### **Materials and Methods**

The study is qualitative and interpretive. The theoretical framework combines approaches from the pragmatics of euphemism and taboo language [1; 2], linguistic politeness and face management [3], sociolinguistic research on stigma and labeling [4; 8], and disability studies that distinguish medical and social models of disability [5; 6]. From this perspective, euphemisms are analysed as choices that signal a speaker’s orientation to norms, their stance toward disability, and their positioning of the referent in social space. The empirical material is illustrative and consists of contemporary public examples in Russian and English. The analysis draws on several discourse domains

1. official and bureaucratic language, including administrative formulas and institutional categories

2. educational and medical communication, where diagnostic and support vocabulary is common

3. journalistic and media discourse, including public awareness campaigns

4. everyday and digital communication, where euphemisms compete with direct terms, slang, and identity language

The method is close contextual reading with attention to three levels. First, lexical and morphological form, including nominal patterns, modifiers, and syntactic constructions. Second, pragmatic function, including mitigation, distancing, respect signaling, and avoidance of stigma. Third, ideological frame, including medicalisation, rights orientation, charity orientation, or identity affirmation

In both languages, examples are treated as discourse moves rather than as isolated dictionary items. Russian examples are kept in the original language to preserve their stylistic and institutional flavour and to avoid the loss of pragmatic nuance in translation. The goal is not to build frequency statistics but to reveal stable strategies and contrasts in the euphemistic systems.

## Results

The analysis indicates that Russian and English disability euphemisms form multi layer systems where lexical choice depends on domain, audience and communicative goal. In both languages, euphemisms serve as tools of mitigation and as signals of moral alignment, yet they also perform deeper functions, including categorisation, social regulation and identity construction.

Euphemistic strategies in English English disability euphemisms often develop through person orientation, abstraction and positive reframing. A widely institutionalised strategy is person first naming, where the person is grammatically foregrounded and disability is expressed as an attribute or circumstance. Typical patterns include “person with a disability”, “people with disabilities”, “child with autism”, “student with a learning disability”. Such constructions minimise reduction of a person to a category and align with politeness norms that prioritise individual dignity.

A second strategy is functional description that avoids global labels. Instead of naming a person as “disabled”, speakers use terms such as “wheelchair user”, “Deaf person” in some communities, “blind person”, “person who uses assistive technology”, “person who needs accommodations”. This strategy shifts focus from a generalised category to concrete interactional needs and supports, which fits the social model frame that emphasises barriers and participation [5; 6].

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A third strategy is positive or compensatory reframing, sometimes criticised for artificiality. Examples include “differently abled”, “physically challenged”, “special”. These expressions aim to replace deficit implications with a neutral or affirmative tone. However, in many English speaking contexts they are perceived as patronising or vague, because they can obscure real needs or sound like avoidance rather than respect. The existence of this tension demonstrates that euphemisms may increase politeness on the surface while decreasing perceived sincerity.

A fourth strategy is bureaucratic standardisation. Institutions often choose stable umbrella terms, such as “persons with disabilities”, “disability services”, “accessibility”, “reasonable accommodations”. These terms are designed for policy clarity and legal applicability, and they reduce interpersonal variability in naming. Yet bureaucratic stability also produces distance, making the referent appear as a case or category rather than a participant.

Euphemistic strategies in Russian Russian disability euphemisms demonstrate a strong institutional and bureaucratic component alongside everyday usage. A common official strategy is the replacement of the direct noun “инвалид” with person oriented formulas such as “человек с инвалидностью” and “лицо с инвалидностью”. The noun “лицо” functions as an administrative legal marker, and the prepositional phrase “с инвалидностью” turns disability into an attribute rather than an identity. The difference between “человек” and “лицо” is pragmatically important. “Человек” signals warmth and dignity, while “лицо” signals institutional distance and document style.

A second widely spread strategy is the use of broad euphemistic categories built around limitation or special status. Typical examples include “лицо с ограниченными

возможностями здоровья”, “человек с ограниченными возможностями”, “ребёнок с ОВЗ”, “особенный ребёнок”, “дети с особыми образовательными потребностями”. These formulas vary in tone. “Ограниченные возможности” and “ОВЗ” are institutional, frequently used in education and medical contexts, while “особенный” is affective and often used in charity and media narratives. The pragmatic effect is mitigation through indirectness, yet the ideological frame may shift from rights orientation to paternalism, depending on context.

A third strategy is mobility based euphemism, such as “маломобильные граждане” and “маломобильные группы населения”. This naming is common in accessibility discourse and urban planning, where the focus is on movement and infrastructure. It can be inclusive, because it covers not only disability but also temporary mobility limitation, older age, pregnancy, or parents with strollers. At the same time, it may invisibilise disability as an identity by dissolving it into a general planning category.

A fourth strategy is medical diagnostic naming used as a euphemistic substitute in everyday speech. Instead of a general label, speakers may refer to a diagnosis or functional impairment. Examples include “человек с нарушением слуха”, “ребёнок с РАС”, “ребёнок с задержкой развития”. Such expressions can reduce stigma by using clinical neutrality, but they also medicalise the person and risk presenting disability as pathology rather than social difference.

Functional distribution across discourse domains Across both languages, the choice of euphemism correlates with discourse domain. In official contexts, stable umbrella terms dominate, such as “persons with disabilities” and “лицо с инвалидностью”. In education, support oriented euphemisms occur, such as

“students with accommodations” and “дети с ОВЗ”. In media discourse, affective euphemisms and inspirational narratives are frequent, including “special needs” and “особенные дети”. In activist and identity discourse, direct terms and identity first language may be preferred, including “disabled” as an identity marker and, in Russian contexts, the reclamation or neutralisation of “инвалид” by some speakers. These patterns show that euphemisms are not universally “better”. Their appropriateness depends on community norms and communicative goals.

A key result is that euphemisms operate as indexical signs. They point not only to disability but also to the speaker’s stance, institutional affiliation, and ideological frame. Choosing “человек с инвалидностью” instead of “инвалид” signals a modern rights oriented style. Choosing “особенный ребёнок” signals emotional involvement but may imply charity framing. Choosing “differently abled” signals positive intent but may be interpreted as avoidance. Therefore, euphemisms function as social markers that organise interaction beyond referential meaning.

### Discussion

The comparison supports the view that euphemisms are cultural mechanisms of face management and social control. From the perspective of politeness theory, euphemisms reduce threats to positive face by expressing respect, avoiding devaluation, and showing sensitivity to the interlocutor’s identity [3]. In disability discourse, such face management is crucial because naming can trigger stigma, which Goffman described as a socially constructed mark that transforms a person’s status and interactional expectations [8]. Euphemisms attempt to interrupt the stigmatizing script by shifting

attention from deficit to personhood, rights, or participation.

However, euphemisms also produce ambiguity and tension. One tension concerns sincerity versus avoidance. Overly indirect or overly positive euphemisms may be interpreted as condescending or as refusal to name reality. For example, English “special needs” and Russian “особенный ребёнок” often evoke charity narratives and may infantilise adults. Such terms can maintain a separation between “normal” and “special”, reinforcing the very hierarchy they seek to soften. In this sense, euphemisms can reproduce social distance while masking it in polite vocabulary.

Another tension concerns institutional language and lived identity. Bureaucratic formulas are designed for classification and resource allocation. English “persons with disabilities” and Russian “лицо с инвалидностью” or “лицо с ограниченными возможностями здоровья” are useful for policy writing, yet in everyday interaction they may sound cold and overly formal. This reveals an asymmetry of communicative power. Institutions name groups to manage services and rights, while individuals negotiate names to represent identity and experience. Conflicts emerge when institutional euphemisms do not match self naming preferences.

A further tension concerns competing models of disability. Medical model language frames disability as impairment requiring treatment or care, whereas social model language frames disability as the outcome of barriers and exclusion [5; 6]. Euphemisms may align with either model. Russian “нарушение” and “задержка” lean toward medicalisation, while “доступная среда” and “инклюзия” lean toward social barriers. English “accessibility” and “accommodations” similarly shift discourse to participation. Yet even social model

vocabulary can become euphemistic if it avoids naming disability where naming is necessary for visibility and rights claims.

The phenomenon of euphemistic renewal, sometimes conceptualised as a “treadmill”, is also relevant. New terms are introduced to avoid stigma, but stigma often transfers to the new term over time because social attitudes remain. This explains why sequences of labels appear in both languages, with older terms becoming marked as rude or outdated. The cycle demonstrates that euphemisms are symptoms of broader ideological change rather than purely linguistic fixes. When inclusion practices improve and barriers decrease, neutral naming becomes easier to sustain.

Digital media intensifies these processes. Online platforms expose users to international terminology, making English patterns influential in Russian discourse through translation and policy borrowing. Calques such as “человек с инвалидностью” reflect person oriented logic similar to “person with a disability”. At the same time, digital discourse encourages fast stance taking and identity signalling. Speakers choose terms to align with activist communities, to avoid public criticism, or to challenge perceived political correctness. Therefore, euphemisms become part of ideological competition, not only politeness.

A practical implication is that inclusive naming requires contextual competence rather than a single “correct” word. In English, debates about person first versus identity first show that different disability communities prefer different forms. In Russian, preferences vary across age groups, institutional domains and activist circles. The safest communication strategy is to use the most widely institutionalised respectful form in formal contexts, while in interpersonal contexts following self naming and community preferences. This approach

treats euphemisms as interactional choices rather than universal prescriptions.

### Conclusion

The study has shown that euphemisms of disability in Russian and English form complex systems that perform multiple functions beyond mitigation. They organise social interaction, index ideological frames, structure institutional classification, and shape ethnocultural and civic notions of dignity, normality and participation.

In English discourse, dominant strategies include person first constructions, functional descriptions and policy oriented umbrella terms, alongside contested positive reframing expressions such as “differently abled”. In Russian discourse, euphemistic development is strongly connected with administrative and educational vocabulary, including “человек с инвалидностью”, “лицо с инвалидностью”, “лицо с ограниченными возможностями здоровья”, “ребёнок с ОБЗ”, “маломобильные граждане”, and affective media terms such as “особенный ребёнок”. In both languages, euphemisms function as signs of moral alignment and as tools of social regulation, yet they can also generate new problems, including vagueness, paternalism and the transfer of stigma to new labels.

In the context of globalisation and digital media, disability euphemisms circulate internationally, creating partial convergence in inclusive formulas but preserving local differences rooted in institutional traditions and cultural expectations. Further research may focus on corpus based comparisons across genres, interviews on self naming preferences within different disability communities, and analysis of how translation and policy borrowing reshape disability lexicons in multilingual settings.

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