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**USE OF EUPHEMISMS IN PRESS RELEASES**

**EIFĒMISMU LIETOJUMS PAZIŅOJUMOS PRESEI**

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## Anotācija

Preses relīze ir efektīvs saziņas līdzeklis uzņēmējdarbībā, kuru izmanto svarīgas informācijas nodošanai ieinteresētajām personām, un tas ir kļuvis īpaši efektīvs krīzes laikā, kad auditorija ir jāpārlicina par uzņēmuma labklājību. Šajā darbā ir apskatīta eifēmismu izmantošana krīzes laikā izdotajos paziņojumos presei, ir pētīti visbiežāk izmantotie veidi, kā piešķirt parastiem vārdiem eifēmisku nozīmi, un analizēts veids, kā eifēmismi ietekme valodu paziņojumos presei. Darbā tiek pētīts arī veids, kā eifēmismi palīdz uzņēmumiem ietekmēt lasītājus un viņu krīzes uztveri. Kvantitatīvās un kvalitatīvās izpētes rezultāti parādīja, ka izaicinošos laikos savos paziņojumos presei uzņēmumi mēdz izmantot eifēismus, sevišķi runājot par tādām tēmām kā, piemēram, nauda, finanses, nodarbinātība. Tika arī atzīmēts, ka tiek izmantoti dažādi eifēmismu veidojošie modeļi, kuru rezultātā rodas vairākas vārdu radošas, jaunas eifēmiskas nozīmes.

Atslēgas vārdi: eifēmismi, krīze, preses relīze, valoda, krīzes komunikācija, krīzes vadība.

## **Abstract**

A press release is an effective business communication tool that is used to deliver newsworthy information to stakeholders, and it has proven to be especially effective during crisis times, when the audience has to be reassured of the well-being of the company. This paper examines the use of euphemisms in press releases issued during crises, explores the most often used ways to create euphemistic meanings of the conventional words, and analyzes the way euphemisms influence the language of press releases. The paper also explores the way euphemisms help companies affect the readers and their perception of the crisis. The results of quantitative and qualitative examination have shown that companies tend to use euphemisms in their press releases during challenging times, especially when speaking about issues like money, finance, employment. It was also noted that various euphemism-creating patterns are used, which results in a number of creative, novel euphemistic expressions.

**Key words:** euphemisms, crisis, press release, language, crisis communication, crisis management.

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# INTRODUCTION

A crisis is an unfortunate part in every company's life cycle. At some point every business entity will have to face challenging circumstances which pose threats to its reputation and daily activities. Generally, a crisis is defined as a breakdown in a system that results in shared stress and negative effects (Perry, Taylor, Doerfel, 2003:206). The process of handling a crisis, i.e. crisis management, has been examined by several researchers. Coombs (2010) has looked at key elements of the process, Ruff (2004) compiled lessons for managing crises that are based on companies' real-life cases. The importance of effective crisis communication is highlighted in the majority of crisis management approaches, and it has proven to be vital in retaining company's reputation.

Acknowledging the fact that crisis communication is important, Zhang and Borden (2019) researched the linguistic aspects of the texts issued during crisis. They studied the relationship between the linguistic choices and perception of an organizational crisis. Although they have not come across euphemisms in this particular research, euphemisms as a linguistic concept are widely used in all genres and contexts and have become a great tool for hedging and manipulating readers' perception of the text. Their use in business context, however, is a matter of great controversy. While some could justify their use as a means to protect readers' feelings (Anthonissen, 2008), others indicate that companies use them due to the wish to decrease transparency of the text (Suslava, 2019: Online 1).

This particular research focuses on analyzing the use of euphemisms in the crisis communication, namely press releases issued during a crisis. Since there has been little to no research on how euphemisms are used in this genre, the research is topical in understanding whether the use of euphemisms help companies in achieving their aims in communication, or, on the contrary, decreases the transparency of their texts and hinders the delivery of the message to the audience. The research also provides an outlook on how companies form the readers' perception of the problem by using ambiguous expressions and euphemisms.

The **aim** of this paper is to examine the use of euphemisms in press releases during crisis.

In view of the aim, following **research questions** were set:

- 1) What are the most often euphemized terms and notions in press releases during crisis?
- 2) What pattern is used most often to create a euphemism?

To answer the posed questions the following **enabling objectives** were set:

- 1) To review existing literature on the crisis communication and the use of euphemisms;
- 2) To establish the selection criteria and compile an electronic corpus of business press releases issued during a crisis;

- 3) To extract and create a list of euphemisms used there and determine which terms were replaced by the euphemisms;
- 4) To establish the analysis criteria and analyze the euphemisms in the chosen press releases accordingly;
- 5) To draw relevant conclusions.

Quantitative analysis included counting the overall number of euphemisms and euphemistic expression in the corpus, determining the relative frequency of each individual example and formation pattern. Qualitative analysis included the description of the examples found in regards to the concepts and ideas they replace, and in regards to the way the euphemisms were created. In addition, examples were characterized in relation to the way they help companies achieve their aims in crisis communication.

This paper consists of two chapters. Chapter 1 provides theoretical background on the concepts of crisis management, crisis communication, and euphemisms. Chapter 2 describes the research procedure used in the paper, the corpus in the analysis, its examination and findings, and the interpretation of the findings.

# Chapter 1 Crisis Communication in Crisis Management

Crisis is an inevitable event of every company's life, something that every organization has to know how to manage in order to mitigate negative consequences that follow. The comprehensive process of navigating through a crisis and making sure that the company survives is called crisis management; however, there has been no unified definition for that. The chapter presents the concept of crisis management and outlines its key elements, one of which, crisis communication, is the main focus of this paper.

## 1.1. Concept of Crisis

In order to properly define what 'crisis management' is, it is worth looking at the notion of 'crisis' alone. Often it is associated with a series of problems or difficult situations that pose a threat to one's well-being and stability. The same association can be applied to the business context, where, in simple terms, a crisis is an uneasy period of time when a company has to overcome problems and difficulties that impose threat to its activity and prosperity.

Sassen (2003:4) defines crisis as an 'acutely dangerous situation, a turning point of unpredictable outcome, resulting from an unbearable problem or conflict'. As stated by Perry (in Coombs, 2015:18), 'a crisis is some breakdown in a system that creates shared stress'. In his turn, Ruff (2004:3) puts it as follows: 'A crisis is any incident or situation, whether real, rumoured or alleged, that can focus negative attention on a company or organization internally, in the media or before key audiences'. Hermann (1963:63) separates crisis from other problematic events by mentioning three characteristics of a crisis, which are surprise, threat, and short response time. It becomes clear that the common ground for definitions of a crisis is the fact that it is a real or an alleged situation that poses threats to a company and its stakeholders.

Although all crises impose threats to the organization and its activity, what can differentiate them is their nature and the source of the problem that caused the breakdown. Ruff and Aziz (2004:3) mention that 'the precise nature of an emergency situation might be hard to anticipate'; however, he puts all crises in two categories – events that are 'simmering' and events that are 'sudden'. He exemplifies sudden crises as events like accidents and emergencies, acts of terrorisms; events, that could not be anticipated and for which there are no obvious prerequisites. Simmering crises, on the other hand, are the result of already existing dangerous situations, such as industrial unrest or inefficient management within the organization, which could transform into a crisis anytime. Ruff and Aziz (2004:4) state that crises like these could, and should, be anticipated, if the

potential danger is monitored. He also states that, in contrast to a popular opinion that a crisis is always sudden, most crises are expected and predictable.

Coombs (2015:3) provides a different perspective on the notion of crisis, stating that it is the 'perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders [...], and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcome'. The given definition captures traits that are characteristic to a crisis situation and includes the parties affected by it – stakeholders. Coombs (ibid.) further explains that whenever deciding whether an organization is in crisis, it is important to look at the situation from the readers' point of view and think about how they perceive the problem in discussion, highlighting the fact that if the company's stakeholders believe there is a crisis happening, it does exist. According to Coombs (ibid.), 'management must be able to see the event from the stakeholders' perspective to properly assess whether a crisis has occurred'. Another important trait of a crisis mentioned by Coombs (ibid.) is that it is not a localized, small-scale incident, but a rather large event that has a potential to disrupt or significantly affect the entire organization. That means that usually a crisis has influence over several aspects of the organization simultaneously, for example health, safety, environmental issues, or its economic activities.

## **1.2. Types of Crises**

From the various definitions provided, it becomes clear that the common ground for all crises is a potential threat to a person or an organization. However, all crises vary in sizes and areas of influence, making them different in nature and destructive potential, and meaning that different approaches are needed to handle each of them. In order to facilitate a deeper understanding of each particular case, various scholars have come up with their classification of types of crises, which allowed managers of organizations to narrow down the area in which a crisis happens and find an appropriate solution to overcome it.

A variety of critical situations proves that the nature of each of them is very different. Some scholars, for example, Ruff and Aziz (2004), put crises into the groups of natural disasters and organizational malfunctions, others, for example, Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2007:30), have a much more detailed classification of crises. Dividing crises into two big groups of intentional and unintentional crises, which are further sub-divided into subclasses, Ulmer et al. (2007) claim that by narrowing down the root of the problem which led to a crisis, managers are able to find a more suitable approach to the situation.

Thus, intentional crises are events that are initiated by acts with intention to harm, usually by human force, which could be controlled (Ulmer et al., 2007:9). The group includes crises like terrorism, sabotage, workplace violence and poor employee relationships, poor risk management,

hostile takeovers, and unethical leadership. Unfortunately, terrorism has been on top of the most urgent causes of crises nowadays, and virtually any big organization is vulnerable to such threats. Organizations can also become a subject of sabotage, which implies the intentional damaging of the organization by someone inside it (ibid.). Finally, workplace incidents have become more common recently. Employees or former employees undertake violent acts because of accumulated stress, perceived mistreatment by the management, or poor relationships between each other. Poor risk management and inability to foresee coming troubles and challenging moments in daily operations may result in crises of serious nature – from paying fines to presenting public health hazards and causing deaths.

Clearly, not all crises are caused intentionally by individuals, and some crises are indeed unpredictable and rather unavoidable. Ulmer et al. (2007:32) list five types of what they call unintentional crises, and they are natural disasters, unforeseeable technical interactions, product failure, but what are of the most interest in this paper, disease outbreaks and downturns in economy.

Disease outbreaks are not new to companies, as they have been occurring regularly throughout the history. Ulmer et al. (ibid.) mention the example of the H1N1 virus outbreak back in 2009, and the recent COVID19 pandemic is the brightest current example of this type of crisis. A downturn in economy, either on its own or as a result of aforementioned crises, can damage even the most profitable and stable businesses. Ulmer et al. (2007:12) state that ‘if consumers cannot afford [to buy] organization’s products, there is little opportunity to resolve the situation with better communication’ and mention downsizing and plant closure as potential outcomes of crisis of this type.

It would be fair to say that crises are varied in their nature, thus, they can affect the company’s daily operations from various aspects. Organizations have to be aware of both naturally happening crises that are hard to predict or control, and crises that happen within the company and could be prevented. A variety of crises and their potential impact on business has led to a necessity of having a detailed crisis management plan which consists of numerous steps designed to prepare managers for a crisis and successfully overcome it.

### **1.3. Planning as Part of Crisis Management**

Regardless of its type, the crisis has to be properly managed and executive have to make sure that stakeholders suffer as little as possible. Crisis management is a complex process with a series of steps that prepare managers for a potential crisis. Depending on how elaborate the plan is, it can be a useful tool for handling the situation and provide a clear understanding of the present obstacles.

This subchapter explains why careful planning is the key element of crisis management and how it helps companies prepare for and battle the crisis.

Based on the understanding of what a 'crisis' is, crisis management can be related to the processes and techniques used in order to navigate through a challenging situation, to anticipate it and prepare for it. The idea is expressed by Coombs (2015:5), who states that crisis management is a set of factors used to approach a crisis and to lessen the damage incurred by it. He adds that one of the main goals of crisis management is to protect the organization and its stakeholders from negative consequences. Not only should the organization deal with the effects of a crisis, it should also anticipate such emergencies and be prepared for them. Coombs (2015:21) presents the concept of crisis management as a set of four interconnected factors, and they are prevention, preparation, response, and revision.

The first factor, prevention, represents the actions taken to avoid critical situations, which, unfortunately, is not always possible. The second factor, preparation, includes the development of a crisis management plan, which is a central element of the process of crisis management. As Coombs (2015:3) points out, 'when crisis management fails, stakeholders and organizations suffer'. This exemplifies the importance of a thought-through plan. Anthonissen (2008:15) states that organizations across all industries should have an 'up-to-date crisis communication plan', as it is an 'essential tool in dealing with a crisis, a disaster, or an accident'. He explains the importance of such a plan with the fact that being prepared and having a clear line of actions help managers to be in control of the situation. Ruff and Aziz (2004:7) support the idea of having updated plans by stating that 'well-run organizations update and practice their emergency preparedness at regular intervals'. Similar idea is expressed by Augustine (2000:12), who claims that companies must have different kinds of plans, such as action plans, communication plans, essential relationships. A crisis management plan consists of many parts and requires special knowledge from various areas, such as media relations, risk assessment, environmental scanning, reputation management, and, last but not least, crisis communication strategies (Coombs, 2015:1). At this stage, it is important to prepare the risk management team and/or spokespersons for a potential crisis.

The third factor, response, refers to the implementation of the crisis management plan, either in a simulated crisis or a real one. The importance of this factor is not to be underestimated, because publicly this stage is the most visible. The response of the organization is seen by general audience and stakeholders, and it is reported and evaluated in media. Companies get judged upon their reactions and their actions. Because of publicity, big focus is put on the communication methods and strategies chosen by the organization. Coombs (2015:6) notes that the response helps achieving the ultimate objective of the crisis management, that is, to protect the company and its stakeholders, which can also result in the improved reputation and stronger position on the market.

Lastly, the fourth factor, revision, includes evaluation of the previous three steps. At this point, the organization can have a look back on its course of action during the crisis, draw relevant conclusions, and make necessary changes to the plan.

The four aspects, namely prevention, preparation, response, and revision, form the backbone of each crisis management plan and are universal, i.e. are of a great importance to each organization. Depending on the specifics of a crisis or an organization, the plan can be changed and adapted to particular needs and opportunities. In addition, each organization decides on what activities to include into the implementation part of the plan, i.e. what actions to take and what activities to perform.

Even though a big part of a crisis management plan is devoted to planning and preparing, processes that happens inside the company are not that evident to the stakeholders, which creates the need to address the problem publicly in a proper and accurate manner. The way these processes are presented will eventually affect the way the stakeholders perceive them. Therefore, special attention should be paid to how a company communicates with the public in the event of a crisis.

#### **1.4. Crisis communication**

Apart from taking profound measures related to the company's inner operations, the company management has to properly address the crisis and the actions taken. Thus, the management is given an opportunity to convince the stakeholders, i.e. investors, suppliers, partners, clients, that, despite challenging circumstances, the company is doing well and still provides value to the community. The way the problem is communicated to the public will help forming readers' opinion about the company, which is why effective crisis communication is considered to be the key part of the crisis management plan. Since crises can develop quite rapidly, communication approaches have to be adjusted to specific circumstances of each specific crisis, which makes communication a subject to constant change and development.

As Coombs (2015:2) mentions, 'crisis communication is the life blood of crisis management'. A well-prepared crisis communication strategy, along with other activities included in a crisis management plan, can result in successful management of an emergency situation, whereas poor management activities and/or poor communication with the stakeholders can damage the reputation of a company and hinder investment. Anthonissen (2008:9) stresses that effective and efficient communication is vital to companies during a crisis, and points out that in general, two main questions should be answered – what has happened and what measures have been taken to deal with the crisis.

In today's highly technological world effective communication is of an even higher value. Globalization has led to the fact that bigger masses of people should be addressed, whereas access to computers, social media and networks has made it very easy to follow what is going on inside big corporations, making them objects of constant scrutiny (Anthonissen, 2008:10). The role of social media has increased as well – the news spread extremely quickly online, and in order to eliminate any chance of confusion and spread of false information, companies need to react swiftly. It would be true to say that because of these advancements and environmental change it has become more difficult to manage communication with all target audiences and to choose the right words when touching upon sensitive matters.

Crisis communication is a multilateral process which has been approached and researched in a variety of disciplines including psychology, sociology, business, mathematics, physics, and political science (Ulmer et al., 2007:14). Each of these academic disciplines has contributed to a better understanding of the process of communication during crisis. Psychology, for instance, provides theoretical background on social perception of risk and crisis. According to Ulmer et al. (2007:15), these findings ‘help us to better understand how people cognitively perceive and ultimately respond to risk and crisis situations’. According to Ulmer et al. (2007:15), sociology analyzes social response to emergencies and social and institutional networks during disasters; the business perspective is focused on studying the role of leadership, organizational learning in response to crisis, as well as it examines cases of companies that have proven to be successful in crisis management. Ulmer et al. (2007:15) mention several major approaches to crisis communication that have been a result of interdisciplinary research, e.g. Corporate Apologia, Image Repair Theory, Situational Crisis Communication Theory, and Organizational Renewal Theory. Unlike first three theories that have a retrospective view on the problem, the latter focuses on opportunities provided by a crisis and new paths of development for the company. One of the features mentioned in the theory is ethical communication.

Ethical communication and prospective vision are central features in Organizational Renewal Theory (ibid. :16). Ulmer et al. state that through communication, companies reveal their true values and beliefs, which greatly affects stakeholders' perception of the problem. What is more, ethical communication is a base for creating a positive outlook on a rather upsetting event. Thus, stakeholders see the crisis not only as a threat, but also as a new opportunity for development. By affecting public opinion that way, companies ensure that their employees, partners, clients remain loyal to them and stay with them through the crisis (Ulmer et al., 2007:318).

An extensive research on crisis communication from different perspectives facilitates a better understanding of the process. The existing knowledge helps managers to handle the crisis situation better, foresee possible implications and prepare for them in advance. The research has also

provided a variety of theories, and even though each theory has its own focus and puts forward principles based on different features, there are elements that characterize crisis communication in general and from which companies benefit regardless the type of crisis and other circumstances.

### **1.5. Key Elements of Crisis Communication**

Crisis communication in general can be broken down in several basic elements that serve companies as a guide towards better communication with their stakeholders. These elements are inherent to all approaches, and, therefore, they are suited to any type of emergency. The elements are responsiveness, spokesperson, and message.

Anthonissen (2008:174) states that the information provided during a crisis should be ‘open, available, and instant’, and specifies that communicating online only puts additional requirements to organizations, e.g. the necessity of being even more responsive and making sure that their communication plans follow current trends of communication and are easy to be adapted to specific circumstances. The importance of a prompt response is acknowledged also by Ruff and Aziz (2004:42), who state that communicative decisions regarding what message to deliver to what audiences have to be taken quickly. By acting fast and delivering the right message, companies can achieve the goal of crisis communication, which is protection of the stakeholders and the reputation of a company (Anthonissen 2008:28).

Both Anthonissen (2008), and Ruff and Aziz (2004) discuss the importance of not only the main message that is being delivered, but also of people who deliver it. For example, Anthonissen (2008:31) states that a person responsible for the communication during a crisis should be specifically trained for that, and, ideally, have an existing relationship with the press. Ruff and Aziz (2004:23) consider that having a CEO as a spokesperson has its benefits. ‘The CEO may know less about the details of the situation than the local management, but his or her physical presence sends two important messages: I care, and I am accountable’ (ibid). Anthonissen (2008:176) holds the same opinion and adds that the presence of the CEO in front of the public makes the communication more personal. Stakeholders instantly see the ‘face’ of the organization, which makes them trust the company more.

Speaking about the message that is communicated during a crisis, Anthonissen (2008:41) outlines three key components that each message should contain, and they are concern, relief, and reassurance. The element of concern should get across by simply acknowledging the fact of a crisis (ibid.). Companies are advised to be honest and open about what has happened and let the stakeholders know that the company is doing the best of its abilities to find out the reasons of the problem. Relief should be expressed in a soft way. The main purpose of expressing that is to let the

audience know that the company has the resources for handling the crisis and has, in fact, prepared for it. Lastly, the element of reassurance concerns persuading the audience that the company is moving towards resolving the problem and, most importantly, is working on preventing the crisis from happening again (ibid.).

The three elements above are similarly outlined and detailed by Ruff and Azuz (2004:43). They mention that admitting the fact of a crisis should be done in plain language, which implies that the company has nothing to hide and is in control of the situation. They also relate speaking openly to ‘addressing the emotion behind the issue’. Another point Ruff and Aziz make captures the role of the audience in shaping the message. Ruff and Aziz (2004:44) say that ‘what the audience wants to hear is as important as what you want to say’, which shifts the attention to the interests and emotions of readers, and, once again, proves that their perception of the problem is an important matter.

Readers' emotions and perception of the text are considered to be extremely powerful in crisis time. Anthonissen (2008:184) draws a clear distinction between facts and perception, saying that ‘in the business world we work with facts, but in the sphere of public affairs we deal with perceptions’. He continues by explaining that ‘companies need to speak in human terms, understanding the emotion of the issues, not just the facts’. Augustine (2000:15) suggests that understanding emotions instead of focusing on technical aspects helps to look at the problem differently.

Since the stakeholders are the ones who form the reputation of a company, it is worth seeing the situation through their eyes. The language used when communicating with the audience can deeply affect peoples’ emotions, and, therefore, opinions. Overall, it can be said that the main focus of the crisis communication should be openness towards the audience and readiness to engage in a discussion. Open communication includes being truthful to those who are interested in the company’s well-being and delivering a clear message, thus firmly establishing the company’s stance in the situation.

## **1.6. Press Release as Crisis Communication Genre**

When it comes to addressing the public during a crisis, the message could be spread via different channels and through different text genres. Technological advancement and popularity of social media helps in doing that and provides more opportunities to reach people (Coombs, 2015:23). As mentioned above, often CEOs prefer to address the issues themselves, and they do so by writing letters to the stakeholders or publishing a CEO statement. Another way to keep the audience updated is by posting articles in business blogs or companies' websites. However, one of the most

popular text genres in communication with public remains to be a conventional press release, which is to be discussed in this subchapter.

Historically, press releases have occupied an important position in public relation discourse. Catenaccio (2008:2) defines a press release as ‘a short piece of writing issued by companies or institutions to communicate newsworthy information to the journalist community on the one hand, and to the general public [...] on the other’. Pander Maat & de Jong (in Jokela 2020:12) also acknowledge the connection of the genre with journalist community, stating that companies use press releases ‘to provide their version of information that is deemed to be of interest to the general public, in the hope that journalists will pass it on’. With its primary purpose of delivering the story in the news first-hand, in a direct and trustworthy way, a press release has always been a powerful tool for companies to handle their communication with both media and general public. By issuing a press-release, a company or an institution shares what it believes is newsworthy information, be it the launch of a new product or description of the crisis management process.

According to Swales (1991:42), a genre is defined by a set of communicative events and its members, who share this set of communicative purposes. As Askehave (1999:15) puts it, ‘the factor determining genre membership is that of the goal or “communicative purpose” of a text’. Therefore, a communicative purpose can be defined as a goal that a text intends to reach by means of its linguistic features. The communicative purpose of a press release cannot be defined univocally. As mentioned above, one of the primary aims of a press release is to inform the public about news happening within the company; however, McLaren and Gurau (2005:12) add that the target audience of press releases is very diverse, and apart from journalists includes all stakeholders such as potential investors, shareholders, and also competitors. Because of this diversity companies are now interested in promoting their activities as well, which is another purpose of press releases nowadays.

Bhatia (in Jokela, 2020:15) admits that genres are very dynamic in their nature, which means that they and their features are changing despite being seen as conventional concepts. He also mentions that there are certain genres that are 'mixed' and typically combine different communicative purposes within themselves. A mix of promotional and informational intentions puts the genre into the category of ‘hybrid genres’ which, according to Fairclough (2013:185), are defined as genres that are the result of the blurring of boundaries between two discourses. Because of its dual nature, the genre of a press release is considered to be problematic to discuss (Lassen, 2006).

Catenaccio (2008:3) points out that initially press releases were meant to address the journalist community, although recently the focus has shifted to communicating the information directly to the general public. She explained that the reason behind having journalists as a third-

party channel was, and still is, a desire to generate more publicity and turn the press release into an actual story, thus promoting the company as well as informing about something new. The shift towards addressing press releases straight to the general public has several reasons. First, due to the technological advancement, almost every company operates its own website where all news and information is collected. Those readers who are interested in the specific company are more likely to visit its website and review all necessary information, rather than look for the information online and getting it from different sources. Then, nowadays companies aim at establishing loyal relationships with their customers, which implies being honest to the readers in order to gain their trust and loyalty. This is achieved by eliminating the third-party channel, which, to some extent, can distort the information, or present it differently from how the company would want it to be presented. In addition to that, by publishing the news themselves, companies have more control over the published content, eliminating the editing that may occur in the journalist community. It can be said that because press releases aim at persuading different groups of stakeholders, it is in the interests of the company to establish trustful relationships with all of them, keeping in mind that their interests might differ. This implies that the language used in press releases should contribute to the transparency and convey the message in a clear and understandable way.

During a crisis press releases play an even more important role, as they become a primary source of information about what happened and what is the company's plan on dealing with it. Press releases that are published in critical times most often address the necessity to lay off employees, reduce spending, restructure, or even file for bankruptcy. The information presented in a press release is official, and is likely to be used further by journalists, who will address the problem in various news outlets (Catenaccio, 2008:7).

Through the text, i.e. a press release, organizations acknowledge the existence of a crisis and try to persuade readers that appropriate measures are taken in order to handle the problem. Thus, it can be assumed that via press releases, companies also aim at re-assuring the readers of their safety, convincing them of a proper crisis handling. In addition, press releases help companies to enhance their reputation, create the image of a strong business entity that is doing well despite the crisis. Catenaccio (2008:14) mentions that press releases are also expected to deliver 'positively connotated information', which might seem as a challenge when the issue addressed is a crisis or a lay off.

### **1.7. Language of Press Releases**

As already mentioned, a press release is a combination of two discourses, namely informational and promotional, which inevitably affects the language used in its text. In addition, press releases have

to be as direct and frank as possible if companies wish to establish a trustworthy relationship with their audience, which also has an effect on the language in the press release. However, by constantly developing, the genre of press release has acquired new features in terms of the language used. The following subchapter will discuss how the genre of press release has changed over time and how the language of the genre can be characterized.

Traditionally, press releases are advised to be written without promotional language and be as informational as possible in order to avoid the 'hybridization' of the genre, since they are the antecedent of news reports (Marken 1994; Williams, 1994; Citroen Saltz, 1996 in Jokela, 2020:13). The informative value of a press release consists mostly of the content and facts that are presented, but it can be also supported by linguistic elements that make the text, i.e. a press release, sound more professional. Wojtak (2016:5) states that purely informative press releases are characterized by strict structural pattern, high level of precision of expressions, conciseness, and relevant lexical and syntactic structures, e.g. colloquial vocabulary, neutral register, and professional vocabulary known to the general public.

As the genre is constantly developing, it is hard to deny that nowadays the promotional element has to be taken into account as well, and merely informational press releases would be less successful than those which use elements of promotional language. Moreover, the use of specific linguistic features helps companies build their public image or, in other words, advertise themselves, which eventually makes the companies more newsworthy. Zefkili (2015:94) analyzed what linguistic aspects companies use in the press releases in order to enhance their public image in the journalist community and appear more newsworthy, thus making press releases more likely to be converted into news articles. She has found that the features that companies exploit the most are the first- and third-person self-reference, definite description, and time and place deixis.

During the close inspection of a range of press releases, Zefkili (2015:94) found out that companies try to enhance their public image by self-referencing through third person and using the company's proper name or the word 'the company', by using the first-person pronoun 'we' and subsequently using possessive adjective 'our', by quoting people who work in the organization, and by avoiding using personal pronouns 'I' and 'my'. Zefkili attributes self-referencing in the form of the company's proper name to the institutional discourse and marks that in this way the writer of the press release speaks out not as an individual, but as a 'public identity or role'. Zefkili (2015:95) further expands on this linguistic feature by explaining that 'companies refer to themselves through their proper names as a means of detaching the identity of the author/speaker of the press release and projecting company's identity'. Moreover, the 'personal voice' of the narrator is neglected intentionally in favor of the companies' objectives (ibid.). This conclusion is supported by the absence of personal pronouns 'I' and 'my' in the press releases Zefkili analyzed. She concludes with

the idea that companies employ 'the third-person self-reference to make their press releases seem more objective and neutral, rather than self-interested and promotional' and that the reason for this is the intention to 'align the corporate frame with the news one' (Jacobs in Zefkili, 2015:95). The similar justification applies to the word 'the company' which is used as a mere replacement for the proper name, helping to avoid repetition. With respect to the inclusive pronouns 'we' and 'our', Lipovsky (in Zefkili 2015:96) notes that the use of such pronouns helps to build solidarity with the readers. In addition, Cornelissen (in Zefkili, 2015:96) states that by having both third-person self-reference and features of inclusive language, i.e. personal pronouns 'we' and 'our', companies seem to have more competitive advantage than their rivals, as they build both their corporate image and enhance the sense of group feeling with their stakeholders and employees. Zefkili (2015:96) highlights that this combination 'leads to a high level of solidarity and triggers the sense of organization's uniqueness'.

Next linguistic feature that was detected by Zefkili (2015:97) in a set of press releases was 'the definite description', which relates to occurrences of describing a company in a very vivid and rather promotional way. Zefkili mentions two functional ways that definitive descriptions serve, and they are referential/qualificational and attributive/identificational. The first way concerns the way how an individual can be described, whereas the second aims at 'attributing one or another particular trait to one individual' (ibid.). Zefkili's most compelling finding is that companies exploit definite descriptions not only when speaking about themselves as entities, but also when speaking about their services or products. Thus, definite description can be associated with inductive reasoning, i.e. if customers consider that the service/product is of a high quality, and services and products are the essence of the company, then the whole organization is valuable (ibid.). Despite being a great linguistic tool to make a press release more promotional, definite description might be labeled as 'parasitic' (Donnellan in Zefkili 2015:97). Wilson (in Zefkili, 2015:97) states that definite descriptions are mostly used 'with the intent to praise, exaggerate and enhance the professional abilities of a company', thus making it a tool that has to be used very attentively. Lack of trust towards this tool is also expressed by Jacobs (in Zefkili 2015:97) who characterizes self-referencing through definite description as 'a powerful mechanism that is not as innocent as it may seem' partly due to the fact that such descriptions focus only on the intentions of press releases themselves, not the news articles that might follow.

Speaking about another significant linguistic feature of press releases, time and place deixis, Zefkili (2015:98) states that time and place deixis contributes the most to the newsworthiness of a press release, despite the fact that 'time and place deixis might be an obstacle to the process of rewording', meaning that journalists might favor such press releases less. Sacks (in Zefkili, 2015:98) exemplifies time and place deixis as following: 'For one, "today" is not equivalent to the

series of other days in the sense of being just some day. “Today” in part constitutes the warrant for the report, i.e. to say it happened “today” is to claim it as potential “news”.

Overall, Zefkili's work has shown that linguistic features that are aimed at enhancing the reputation of the company eventually lead to its promotion, and, subsequently, to increasing its newsworthiness in the eyes of journalists and readers. Zefkili's research is not the only one that proves that modern press releases are far from being just informational and have indeed shifted towards promotional discourse.

Jakelo (2020) in her study analyzed a connection between a press release being promotional and it getting a sufficient media cover. The initial doubt was that overly promotional press releases were not favoured by journalists, and, therefore, had less chances to become news articles and reach a wider audience. Jokela (2020) has come to a conclusion that nowadays the situation has changed and the journalist community might not be as skeptic about promotional press releases as they were before. Jokela (2020:34) confirms that press releases do use promotional elements, and identifies them as premodifiers, intensifying adjectives, evaluative adjectives, property specifying adjectives, intensifying quantifiers, comparative and superlative degrees, intensifying adverbs, time adjuncts, place, intensifiers of numerals, mitigators of numerals, modal intensifiers, and connectives.

When analyzing the relation between the presence of promotional elements in a press release and its presence coverage in the media, Jokela (2020:49) points out that 'there seems to be a distinct difference when the press release is about positive or neutral development versus negative development'. The findings of her study have shown that press releases about positive or neutral developments and that are supplemented with promotional elements are covered in media significantly more often than press releases about negative events. On the other hand, Jokela (2020:50) admits that the overall correlation between promotional elements in press releases and coverage in media is hardly visible, therefore promotionality of press releases cannot be definitively tied to its media presence. She further concludes that whether or not there is a direct connection between elements of promotion and acquired media coverage, press releases ‘aren’t probably as free of promotionality as the academic research might claim, hope, or believe’ (ibid.).

According to Bhatia’s (2000:160) claim that in most cases of genre bending ‘the informative functions are colonized by promotional functions’, it can be observed that press releases have become more promotional. Indeed, it is seen that despite previous researchers advising to avoid using promotional language in press releases, the genre has definitely shifted towards promotional discourse. The fact that press releases have become more promotional and are now a bright example of a 'hybrid' genre used in the modern business communication also supports Bhatia's (2000) idea that genres are dynamic constructs and are subjects to change and development.

It would be true to say that press release as a genre, including its language, has changed over time, which once again proves the idea that genres are dynamic constructs and are subjects to development. The linguistic aspects of press releases that initially aimed at forming a strong, reputable corporate identity and enhance corporate image have eventually led to the promotion of companies. More recently, however, another fact has to be taken into account, and it is public sensitivity.

### **1.8. Public Sensitivity as an Affecting Factor**

As the development of the genre continues, it might be suggested that the tendencies in writing a press release are changing as well. People seem to be sensitive about an increasing number of topics, e.g. layoffs, employment in general, private finances, financial matters, which has given a rise to the 'politically correct' use of language. Any topic or issue that might be upsetting to the audience might need to be addressed differently than it would be addressed previously. Public sensitivity about certain issues is especially to be taken into account during a crisis, when people are emotionally disturbed. This sub-chapter provides an outlook on tendencies in crisis communication nowadays and explores the way they have affected the choice of words in the texts.

Pop (2010b:147) claims: 'Recently, there have been attempts to broaden the concept of non-discriminatory language beyond its application to gender to consider traditional language that discriminates against people on the grounds of: race, ethnicity, religion, age, sexual orientation, physical ability or physical appearance. Hence, the phrase "politically correct" language was coined'. Ayto (in Pop, 2010b:147) then compares the concept of 'political correctness' and that of 'euphemism', stating that 'the phrase "politically correct" is completely mixed up with euphemism and jargon'. Other scholars, for example Rooney&Witte (2000:20) also define euphemisms as 'polite expressions for an impolite idea'. They explain the idea with the fact that euphemism go against clear communication, and this is 'why bureaucrats and the politically correct love them'. Pop (2010b:147) argues that contemporary studies do not see politically correct language as euphemistic, and describes it as a more precise and accurate choice of words. The similarity and contradiction between two concepts make them interesting objects for the research, and euphemisms, in particular, are linguistic tools worth examining.

A necessity to be more aware of the word choice while communicating to wide audiences is also dictated by the fact that the world is rapidly globalizing, people of different cultures can be the stakeholders of the same company, and certain topics in discussion might be perceived differently due to the cultural differences. Ellwood (Online 2) specifies: 'In situations where you are doing business with someone from another country, social sensitivity is even more important. Each culture

has its own particular behaviors which are considered acceptable, and other behaviors which aren't considered acceptable'. Any inattentive addressing of a situation publicly might cost a company its shareholders or customers, which further leads to a damaged reputation.

Such diversity among stakeholders as well as public sensitivity have undoubtedly led to changes in the language of press releases; however, there is little research on what the changes are exactly. In the course of this particular research, it was suggested that press releases nowadays would have a significant number of euphemisms, i.e. linguistic tools that are used to avoid stating facts directly and protect the readers' feelings. The following sub-chapter will analyze euphemisms, the function they serve in texts in general, and in press releases in particular.

### **1.9. The Role of Euphemisms**

Modern business communication texts, including press releases, are expected to be frank, and managers are expected to deliver their message in a clear, transparent manner. By doing so and not withholding valuable information, companies gain the trust of stakeholders. However, ambiguous sayings and figures of speech are common in both every day and professional contexts. For example, Pop (2010a:2) mentions that doublespeak and euphemisms are actively used in every day speech and in business settings.

Pop (ibid.) defines doublespeak as a deliberate use of language that misleads the reader and disguises certain information, whereas euphemisms are just a part of doublespeak, and are used to soften unpleasant, harsh facts. Postman (1976:186), in his turn, speaks about a euphemism as an 'exalted term used in place of a down-to-earth term', meaning that euphemisms are used instead of commonly known words, plain truth. He further explains that a euphemism comes off less offensive than a word that would rather suggest something unpleasant to the receiver. Rawson (1981:1) agrees that euphemisms are connected to minimizing the offensive effect by saying 'mild, agreeable, or roundabout words used in place of coarse, painful, or offensive ones'.

One particular description of what a euphemism is will be taken as a key definition in this research, and it is the description provided by Warren (1992). According to Warren's (1992:8) definition, 'we have a euphemism if the interpreter perceives the use of some word or expression as evidence of a wish on the part of the speaker to denote some sensitive phenomenon in a tactful and/or veiled manner'. She notes that euphemisms, as linguistic tools, are very dependent on the context, but can also be conventionalized or lose their euphemistic meaning with time. This definition allows flexibility when determining whether a word or an expression is a euphemism, and it seems only natural to approach the notion of euphemisms from the side of own's perception. It would be fair to say that euphemisms are often attributed to emotions, peoples' feelings. Even

historically, euphemisms have been revealing inner anxieties, fears, and sensitivities of humans (Rawson, 1981:2). Kuczok (2014:109) agrees with the fact that euphemisms are dependent on the language and culture they are used in, stating that ‘euphemisms belong to those special instances of language use that avoid the literal and direct naming of certain things or experiences because of the taboo associated with them in a given society’.

Rittenburg&Stephenson (2015:4) note that ‘business managers run less risk of confusing or misleading employees by speaking plainly and using more transparent language’, therefore highlighting the importance of speaking openly in today’s business environment. Although business communication texts should deliver a clear message, it should be done so in a polite and professional manner. According to Pop (2010a:127), people tend to use ‘some implicit and elegant expressions to replace those that are violent and vulgar’ in order to maintain the necessary professional politeness. Both doublespeak and euphemisms serve that purpose and are used to present unpleasant information in a more respectful and soft form, which in a way influences the way readers will perceive the information provided. Euphemisms, for example, are often used in corporate social responsibility (CRS) reports and are important in communicating in this text genre (LaCour&Kromann, 2011:277).

Speaking about euphemisms and their use in the business context in particular, they are used with several purposes. Rittenburg& Stephenson (2015:4) state that euphemisms are used more often in today’s business world, even though this practice decreases transparency of the text. Companies are interested in presenting the good side of affairs and conceal unpleasant facts, making euphemisms come in handy (Rawson, 1981:1). According to LaCour&Kromann (2011:275), the main reason why big organizations use euphemisms is because the modern world requires them to consider interests of many stakeholders, which leads to communication in terms ‘beyond those provided by the language of economy’. LaCour&Kromann (2011) show that euphemisms do a great job when there is a need to address drastically different key audiences, e.g. shareholders and philanthropic organizations. Murphy (1996:16) explains the growing popularity of euphemisms in communication with the fact that they ‘have become a fit medium for the expression of just about everything’. On one hand, euphemisms do not act in favor of a text, making it less direct; on the other, they make the text sound more polite and less upsetting for some readers. In addition, euphemisms enrich the language and soften the hard edges of the meaning (ibid.).

Another purpose of euphemisms is to reduce the impact of negative terms, thus reducing their transparency (ibid.). To some extent, euphemisms help avoiding confrontation with the audience and focus their attention on the solutions found, rather than on the problem itself. Bing (in Rittenburg&Stephenson, 2015:6) concludes that the use of euphemisms increases particularly during hard times, when presenting information accurately is even more pertinent. He also mentions

that ‘people speak plainly in good times’. The idea of using euphemisms during challenging times in the business environment is supported by McGlone and Batchelor (2003:252) who suppose that euphemisms are also used to save one’s face, which in the business context might be the face (the reputation) of an organization. They also state that ‘euphemizing occurs more often when people expect to meet others face to face rather than when they will remain anonymous’. This is especially topical to business communication, as none of the communication in this context happen anonymously. Official statements are made by appointed representatives who are known to the public; therefore, the readers get to know the ‘face’ of the organization.

As mentioned earlier, euphemisms can be used in order to protect readers’ feelings. To further this idea, Rittenburg and Gladney (2005) came to a conclusion that euphemisms can also affect the way readers perceive the text, alter their opinion about the company or the situation, as well as they have the potential to influence readers’ behavior.

Studies of the use of euphemisms in different contexts have proven the great ability of euphemisms to modify people’s attitude towards the problem discussed in a text, appeal to the readers’ feelings as well as protect them, and make sure that not one of the readers feels offended. However, it is important to acknowledge that there are risky sides related to the use of euphemisms that could lead to negative effects both on the message and on the readers; therefore, it is important to use euphemisms reasonably and not oversaturate text with euphemistic words and expressions.

LaCour&Kromann (2011:275) admit that euphemisms are a risky tool to use in business communication. One of the dangers they mention is that euphemisms can be left unrecognized by the audience, thus, the message will not come across and the confusion might be created. The confusion leads to ineffective communication and decreased perception of the text, when it is not understood by the readers, which results in negative consequences.

LaRocque (in Rittenburg&Stephenson, 2015:316) states that delivering the truth should be the focus of the text, and the idea is supported by Rittenburg (2015:316) who considers that ‘excessive use of euphemisms is often ridiculed’ and should be avoided. In addition, Rittenburg&Gladney (2005:30) state that overuse of euphemisms has a negative effect, and only reasonable amount of such words should be used in a text.

Continuing the idea that using euphemisms does not always lead to a positive outcome, Vickers (in Rittenburg&Stephenson, 2015:318) concludes that in case a company is forced to dismiss its staff, the ‘use of euphemisms exacerbated the painful outcomes of downsizing [for employees]’. In addition to that, studies demonstrate that in the case of a downsizing it is better to communicate openly and honestly with the affected employees rather than use deceptive language (Aucoin and Haynes, 1998).

It then becomes arguable whether euphemisms do companies good in a long run – while they protect both organizations' reputation and readers' feelings, they also decrease the transparency in relationships with the audience that managers are striving for. Criticism towards the use of euphemisms also describes overuse of euphemisms as detrimental to successful communications. (Online 3). There has been no unified stance about the use of euphemisms in business communication – the use of such terms can be justified by their ability to protect readers' feeling, whereas it can also be criticized because of the way euphemisms might mislead people and are, in general, a sign of bad taste in modern communication.

### **1.10. Euphemism classification**

Even though there is no univocal opinion on whether it is appropriate to use euphemisms in the business settings, their varied nature is unarguable. This subchapter presents classifications proposed by different scholars which demonstrate several characteristics of euphemisms and the way euphemistic meaning can be assigned to familiar words.

An important distinction was made by Rawson (1981), who puts euphemisms into groups of positive and negative euphemisms. He considers positive euphemisms as ones that make the euphemized term appear better and more significant to a reader, whereas negative euphemisms mitigate seriousness of a negative consequence. For instance, positive euphemisms are used to speak about occupational titles, e.g. using the word 'custodian' when referring to an engineer, or using 'counsel' instead of a lawyer. Negative euphemisms, according to Rawson (1981:2), are even more culture-specific and show what matters are the most sensitive to native speakers. Most frequently euphemisms in this group are used when speaking about upsetting event, e.g. using 'collateral damage' instead of killing, or referring to intimate topics, e.g. using 'private parts' instead of genitals.

Speaking about other peculiarities of euphemisms in use, Rawson (1981:10) mentions that most of the time, euphemisms are longer than the words they replace. Sometimes, two or three words will be used instead of one, forming a whole euphemistic expression. He explains this with the fact that more words help cover the idea, whereas one word is enough when expressing the thought explicitly.

Samoskaite (2011:13) classifies euphemisms into conscious and unconscious. The criterion for this classification is based on the readers' awareness of the euphemistic meaning of a certain word. Samosakite (ibid.) notes that unconscious euphemisms have been in use for a longer period of time, and language speakers use them with no intention to evade the direct meaning. As an example, she mentions the word 'cemetery' which originally was used as a replacement for the word

‘graveyard’, and now is a common word for denoting the place where the dead are buried. Another example she provides is ‘indisposition’ used instead of ‘disease’, while its original meaning is ‘incapacity for dealing with something’. Thus, it can be concluded that unconscious euphemisms have been in use for so long that people nowadays seldom realize their original meanings.

Conscious euphemisms, on the other hand, are used with a specific intention to express things in a tactful manner, provided that the receiver of the message understand the meaning implied.

Samoskaite (2011:13) provides an example of the expression ‘to powder one's nose’. In this case, the recipient understands that the expression means ‘to go to the bathroom’. Besides two general divisions, Samoskaite (2011) puts euphemisms in six semantic categories, and they are profession, disease, death, sex, crime, and political euphemisms.

Overall, it can be said that euphemisms might slightly alter the meaning of a word, or rather alter the perception of the word by readers, thus influencing public opinion on the topic of discussion. It is also worth to mention that some of the euphemisms are so deeply embedded in humans’ minds that they are used unconsciously, without properly acknowledging the ambiguity of the word.

### **1.11. Euphemism formation**

The ever-changing nature of English language suggests that new euphemistic expressions emerge all the time. Speaking about recent examples, Pop (2010a) mentions the global financial crisis of 2008, which has spawned a range of new euphemisms and made extensive use of existing ones, which mostly referred to mass firing of employees. With the development of language as well as with a growing number of impactful events that need to be addressed publicly, new euphemistic expressions are being formed regularly (Pop, 2010a:129). Such lexical items can be formed in various ways, which, on a certain degree, follow some principles (ibid.).

LaCour&Kromann (2011:269) mention that, within linguistics, euphemisms can be put into groups of acronyms, metaphors, circumlocutions. Some of these forms are also included in the classification provided by Pop (2010a), who puts euphemisms into two categories – lexical devices and syntax devices – which serves as a base of their formation patterns. The following examples of euphemisms are provided by Pop (2010a, 2010b), whereas the conventional meanings of these words are taken from Oxford Online Dictionary (Online 4).

Formation of euphemisms as lexical devices is based on using different types of morphemes and word formation techniques. The group includes euphemisms in the form of acronyms, e.g. *CLM* – Career Limiting Move, *COB* – Close of business; analogies, e.g. a word ‘engineer’, that is used to denote less respectful professions as in ‘custodian engineer’, which

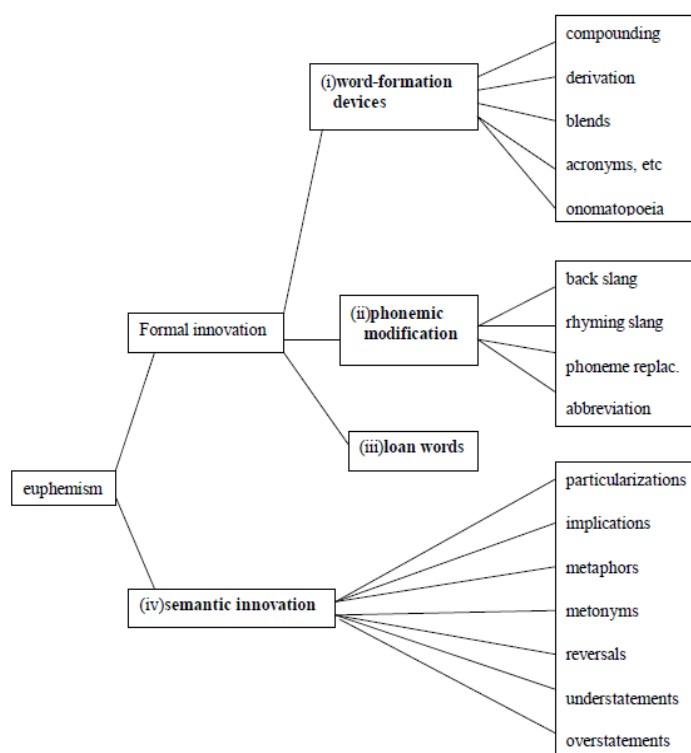
means ‘trash cleaner’; borrowings, e.g. ‘uber, which means ‘very’; negations (adding a negative prefix), e.g. ‘outsourcing’, which means ‘dismissing in-house employees to hire cheaper labour provided by another organization’ or ‘disconnect’, which means ‘lack of understanding on an issue between two people’; substitutions, e.g. ‘onboard’, which means ‘to agree with something’ or ‘magic bullet’, which means ‘the perfect solution to a problem’.

Pop (2010b:148) also gives a special mention to a group of business euphemisms – expressions that are common in workplace and business environment. She puts a special emphasis on this category of euphemisms and even classifies them as ‘buzzwords’, saying that “‘downsizing’, ‘rightsizing’, or ‘re-engineering’ represent the lean philosophy of American business today, [...] and regardless of the name, these words should be thought of as a change process, to be implemented with the same thoughtful, systems approach as any other major organizational development initiative’ (ibid.). Other euphemisms are, for example, ‘letting go’, ‘downsizing’, ‘restructuring’ - referring to a layoff; ‘a challenge’, which means 'a new or difficult task' - referring to any kind of problem or an obstacle; ‘depression’, which means 'a medical condition' – as a substitute to the word ‘recession’; ‘to disinvest’, which means 'to stop investing money' – referring to a rather lengthy ‘to close a retail outlet’.

The group of syntax devices is formed based on the way in which words are combined in a sentence. The group consist of only one form of euphemisms, which is a metaphor, e.g. ‘service charges’, ‘transfer payments’, that are used to replace the process of taxation. Burrige (2012: Online 5) describes this method of creating euphemisms as an analogy or an ‘internal borrowing’, explaining that ‘expressions from one part of the language are incorporated elsewhere’. In case of metaphors, one meaning is transferred from one given context to another (ibid.).

Warren (1992) presents similar classification, which is based on structural and semantic features of euphemisms. Some of the sub-groups overlap with those proposed by Pop (2010a). Warren’s (1992) classification of euphemisms and their formation patterns is taken as a framework for this particular research because of its variability and clear-cut division into groups; however, it is further complemented by the group of negations offered by Pop (2010a) and the group of idioms because of the specifics of the corpus collected during this research. Warren’s (1992) classification consists of four ways of euphemism formation, which are subsequently divided into specific subcategories (Fig.1.1). As Warren puts it, these four main devices can either create new forms of words that were not previously used in the language, or give an existing word a new, euphemistic, meaning. The following examples of euphemisms are provided by Warren (1992), Samoskaite (2011), and Kuczok (2014), whereas the conventional meanings of these words are taken from Oxford Online Dictionary.

In this classification, the group of word formation patterns includes devices like compounding, derivation, acronyms, blends, onomatopoeia. Euphemisms constructed like compounds are, for example, ‘comfort station’ meaning ‘a public toilet’, ‘job action’ meaning ‘a strike by public employees’. This device creates novelty in meaning by combining two seemingly unrelated words into a euphemism for a term that is unacceptable in specific context (Samoskaite, 2011:15). The group of derivations consists of examples like ‘sanguinary’ meaning ‘bloody’, ‘intoxicated’ meaning ‘drunk’. Pop (2010a:129) states that a big share of euphemisms is ‘either borrowed from another language or constructed from one: for English, they are mostly derived from Latin or Ancient Greek’. Samoskaite (2011:47), in her turn, expands the understanding of derivation in terms of creating euphemisms, and describes it as ‘the modification of a foreign term to form a printable modern English word’, specifying that ‘derivation involves adding affixes (non-independent) to existing lexemes, whereby the addition of the affix derives a new lexeme’. To support the expanded understanding of the process, Samoskaite (ibid.) provides examples like ‘disinvestment’, ‘deselect’, which means ‘to remove something from the list of possible choices’, ‘anti-fascist’ which means ‘against the fascism’, and ‘reprioritization’ which means ‘arranging things in a new order of importance’. As an example of a euphemistic acronym, Warren mentions *SAPFU* which stands for ‘surpassing all previous fouls-up’ and is used in military context meaning ‘a chaotic, possibly catastrophic event’. An example of onomatopoeia in euphemisms would be ‘piss’ meaning ‘to urinate’, where the reference is made based on the sound imitation. Unfortunately, Warren does not include examples of blends in her classification.



*Fig. 1.1 B. Warren's Classification of Euphemisms (1992)*

The next group in the classification consists of euphemisms that were formed via phonetic modification. These formation ways are based on phonetic change of the word, thus avoiding saying the meaning explicitly. Samoskaite (2011) admits that euphemisms of this type are mostly used as slang words. The group includes devices like back slang, rhyming slang, phoneme replacement, and abbreviation. An example of back slang would be 'epar' meaning 'rape'; the name of an English football player Garry Abblet has become a euphemism for an 'ecstasy tablet' because of the rhyme between words 'Abblet' and 'tablet'; a phoneme replacement example is 'divil' meaning 'devil'; and, lastly, a euphemism made by abbreviating a sensitive term is 'T.S.' meaning 'transsexual'.

The third group, loan words, consists of words that were borrowed from other languages, and are used to replace certain items in English. For example, 'lingerie' meaning 'underwear' is borrowed from French, whereas 'abdomen' meaning 'belly' is borrowed from Latin. Warren (1992:5) mentions that loanwords are particularly favoured, since they 'imply learnedness and matter-of-factness', thus elevating the tone of the word.

Last but not least, the group of euphemisms that lead to semantic innovation, which, according to Warren (1992) are of the most interest. The group consists of seven devices that are based on different types of connections between words that create new senses of words, thus

creating euphemistic expressions. These are devices like particularization, implication, metonymy, metaphor, reversal, understatement, and overstatement.

As Warren (1992:4) puts it, particularization occurs when ‘the new contextual referent is a member of a set which is a subcategory of the conventional category of referents of the word in question’. Samoskaite (2011:16) explains that general terms, i.e. common words and their conventional meanings, that are used in this category need to be ‘particularized’ in order to make sense for the reader. Examples of particularizations are ‘yellow card’ referring to ‘a warning card in football’, ‘irradiate’ referring to ‘treating the food with radiation in order to preserve’, and ‘growth’ referring to ‘a tumor’. In the example of the ‘yellow card’, the card is indeed yellow; however, it cannot be just any yellow card, and because of the specific context, its functional feature is not explicitly stated. Once put into particular context, i.e. particularized, the meaning of the ‘yellow card’ becomes clear. The example of ‘growth’ presents an example of serving a purely euphemistic function, as the word ‘tumor’ might evoke unhappy feelings among some people.

Implications form a group where a number of euphemisms can be found. Warren (1992:4) states that contextual and conventional referents in this group are often linked semantically, thus can replace each other. Samoskaite (2011:16) explains that in the case of implications, several steps need to be done to reach the intended meaning, and the steps are based on associations. For example, ‘hang up’ is used instead of ‘to end a phone conversation’, ‘go to the toilet’ is used instead of ‘urinate and/or defecate’. In the first example, the association is made between the process when people had to hang the handset of the telephone on the hook, whereas in the second example the association is made between the place (the toilet) and the process that happens there (urinating/defecating). A strong logical connection is seen between the term that is euphemized and its substitute, which allows to convey the meaning to the readers while not stating it explicitly.

Metonymy is another way to create a euphemism. Warren (1992:4) describes it as a co-occurrence relationship between an item of a sensitive topic and its substitute. Kuczok (2014:109) states that metonymy provides a range of possibilities to avoid saying the taboo word, thus making it another fruitful way to create euphemisms. She further explains: ‘The idea behind metonymy in cognitive semantics is using one concept for another that is related to it’. Warren (1992) does not list categories of possible metonymies used for creating euphemisms, whereas Kuczok (ibid.) outlines seven metonymic mappings: one action for another action performed in the same place (‘powdering the nose’ instead of ‘excreting’); general for specific (‘drinking’ instead of ‘consuming alcohol’); a user of the object used (‘an adult drink’ instead of ‘an alcoholic beverage’); a salient property for the entity (‘the evil one’ instead of ‘Satan’, or a blue instead of ‘a policeman’); part for whole (‘a badge’ instead of ‘a policeman’); and a function/role for the entity (‘Lord’ instead of ‘God’).

The next group consists of metaphoric euphemisms. As Warren (1992:4) puts it, by creating euphemisms this way ‘some property of the conventional referent is also a property of the contextual referent’, and Samoskaite (2011:17) describes them as ‘colourful’. For example, a euphemism ‘parted ways’ is used often when referring to the end of a relationship in the context of a conceptual metaphor A RELATIONSHIP IS A JOURNEY. Similarly, a euphemism ‘to depart’ when referring to death is based on the conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY.

Another way to change the conventional meaning of a word is called a reversal. The change happens when the accepted meaning of a word fits, if reversed, a certain context. Samoskaite (ibid.) characterizes reversals as ‘ironic’. Warren (1992:4) provides such example as ‘huge’ which contextually can mean ‘unusually small’, and ‘early’ meaning ‘late’.

Understatements, or litotes, are characterized as following: ‘The conventional meaning of a word fits favoured referent provided the degree to which some feature of meaning applies is boosted’ (ibid.:5). For example, ‘drug habit’ meaning ‘drug addiction’, or ‘plump’ meaning ‘fat’. In the first case, it can be seen that a quite serious notion of ‘addiction’ is replaced by a less serious term ‘habit’, which conventionally means 'a thin that you do often', and in the second one a rather harsh ‘fat’, a direct indication of an excess weight, is replaced by a subtle ‘plump’, which can be applied to various items, e.g. lips, tomatoes, line, and does not evoke direct associations with one’s weight.

As opposed to understatements, overstatements are based on creating the opposite effect. Also called hyperboles (ibid.:5), they replace the meaning of a contextual referent by an exalted term. Al-Khasawneh (2018:220) states that ‘overstatement is defined as the exaggerated language for emotional effect in which forbidden terms are deformed by making them better and bigger than they really look like’. Examples for overstatements would be ‘flight to glory’ meaning ‘to die’, and ‘visual engineer’ meaning ‘a window cleaner’.

To sum up, it can be said that euphemisms are used regularly both by general public and by members of business community. Whether they are used consciously or unconsciously, euphemisms present an interesting field for the research, since they are numerous ways to create new euphemistic expressions, and their meanings could be perceived differently by readers. This paper proceeds with the analysis of euphemisms found in press releases, the most effective communication tool during a crisis, to see how they are used in the business context and whether they are helpful to companies that try to affect the readers’ perception of the problem.

## **Chapter 2 ANALYSIS OF EUPHEMISMS IN CRISIS PRESS RELEASES**

Chapter 2 presents the research procedure and corpus description, along with the analysis of euphemisms found in the selected press releases, which is based on the classification criteria presented in Chapter 1. The description of analysis and its findings are followed by the interpretation of findings and the conclusions drawn on the use of euphemisms in press releases.

### **2.1. Outlining the Methodology and the Corpus**

The methodology of the research is based on the euphemism classification provided by Warren (1992). Euphemisms are analyzed in regards to the concepts and ideas they replace in press releases, as well as in regards to their formation patterns.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, crises can be of various types and related to aspects like nature, environment, finance, politics. In this particular research the focus was put on two types of crisis: major layoffs and bankruptcies in 2021 that have led to the closure of stores or similar outcomes. Although the global crisis of the COVID19 spread was not the primary focus of this research, it has been the main cause for a series of current problems that could be classified as crises. For example, companies across the globe have been forced to lay off large numbers of employees, and this matter has been addressed via press releases. Another major crisis is concerned with the fact that because of an economic downturn (one of the results of the pandemic), a number of organizations found themselves on the verge of bankruptcy and had to shut down their stores, offices, or even close whole production sites. The disruption in economic activity worldwide was sudden and threatening to organizations, which is why the aforementioned problems can be classified as crises.

The corpus consists of 24 press releases (which altogether contain 10 482 words), issued by companies that either implemented mass layoffs or had to shut down their onsite locations, and addressed the matter in press releases, namely companies Hertz, L'Occitane, AirCanada, TripAdvisor, Lyft, WarnerBros Entertainment, Volvo Group, Hyatt Hotels Corporation, Under Armour, Marriott International, and Uber. The texts were retrieved from the web-pages of the companies, and they were issued between April 2020 and January 2021, thus, they reflect modern tendencies of using euphemisms in crisis communication. The companies represent different industries, however, all of them had been stable prior to the crises and had a strong reputation. It could be implied that they have strong crisis communication skills and would use non-offensive language when addressing such sensitive matters like layoffs and closing locations. What is more, the purpose of the press releases, and, therefore, the language in them, could be the desire to

promote the ways the companies handle the situation and to contribute to the positive perception of the organizations.

The press releases were examined for the presence of euphemisms, which were then extracted and analyzed from a quantitative perspective. First, their overall number was counted. Then, they were grouped in accordance to events and process they imply, and the number of examples in each group was determined. The second classification was performed in accordance with the framework proposed by Warren (1992), and the euphemisms were put into groups according to the way they were formed, which was followed by counting the number of examples in each group. As concerns the qualitative analysis, each instance of a euphemism or a euphemistic expression in both classifications was examined in terms of the way it was formed and in terms of what purpose they serve in press releases in analysis, and the impact they have on changing readers' perception of the text.

## **2.2. First Classification. Euphemized Notions**

64 euphemisms and euphemistic expressions were retrieved from the corpus, with a total number of 141 examples which is just around 1,4% of the whole corpus. First, euphemisms were divided into groups according to the idea or the concept they replace or try to make less offensive for the reader, which resulted in 17 different groups of notions and processes that are characteristic to the business environment (see Appendix 1). The following examples are supplemented, when necessary, with conventional meanings of the words, that are taken from Oxford Online Dictionary.

Eight biggest groups contain from five to 43 examples of euphemisms and can, therefore, signify a tendency, and the terms that are euphemized in these groups are 'layoff', 'closure', 'crisis', 'money', 'lose money', 'save/acquire money', 'decrease', 'to finance'. Remaining nine groups have less than five euphemisms in them, and, therefore, it cannot be said that these words are widely used and would be euphemized by other companies. However, it does signify that certain notions have a rather negative connotation and may be considered upsetting for the readers. The words euphemized are 'to restrict', 'not to charge', 'to pay', 'very difficult', 'to take away', 'to reject', 'infectious', 'drastically'.

The biggest group consists of 43 examples, and includes euphemisms that are used to replace the term 'layoff' or the verb 'to layoff', i.e. the process of dismissing workers because the company no longer needs or cannot afford them, making it the most often euphemized notion. The most often euphemistic expression (13 instances) in this group is 'to reduce / a reduction'. Such euphemisms are usually used together with nouns that mean 'staff' or 'employees', for example 'workforce', 'staffing levels', 'headcount', 'layers'. The second most used euphemism (11 instances) in the

group is to 'furlough / a furlough'. The third most used euphemism (five instances) is 'to align/adjust'. In all five cases the verb is also used with a noun that denoted employees, e.g. 'staffing levels', 'labor', 'network'. Next three groups consist of three examples each, and they are euphemisms 'to eliminate', 'to exit/leave', 'impacted'. The verb 'to eliminate' is used with nouns 'jobs' and 'positions', e.g. 'to eliminate the roles', 'eliminate jobs'. Despite the fact that the word 'eliminate' might evoke negative association, as it will be discussed further, it is used with inanimate objects only, thus shifting the focus from harming people to getting rid of something lifeless. Verbs 'to exit/to leave' are used in pair with the word 'employees', e.g. 'they [employees] exit the organization' or 'leaving employees'. The euphemism 'impacted' is used together with words 'employees' or 'job', e.g. 'impacted employees [will receive benefits]', '[resulted in some necessary] job impacts'. Lastly, there are groups with single instances of euphemistic expressions, e.g. 'to put on Off Duty Status', 'termination of employees', 'resulting in a smaller team', and 'parting ways'.

The second biggest group consists of 17 examples, and includes euphemisms that are used to replace the idea of 'closure', i.e. a necessity to shutdown stores and onsite facilities. The most often used euphemisms (three instances in each sub-group) are 'reorganization', 'transformation', and 'to right-size'. While the first two euphemisms are used on their own, the term 'to right-size' is used together with words that imply stores, e.g. 'to right-size its brick-and-mortar presence', 'to right-size the fleet'. Next three groups each contain two examples, and include euphemisms 'to optimize', 'to reduce', 'restructuring'. The verbs 'to optimize' and 'to reduce' were used together with the noun 'footprint', e.g. 'to optimize store footprint', 'to reduce real estate footprint'.

The next biggest groups consist of 15 examples each and include euphemisms that are used to replace the concept of 'money', and 'keeping/saving money'. The word 'money' is never stated explicitly, and instead, the companies use words like 'liquidity' (five instances), 'assistance' (four instances), 'support' (three instances), and 'cash', 'borrowings', 'help', 'resources' (one instance each). In relation to the financial matters, companies also address the way they are planning to save their financial resources. To talk about that, euphemisms like 'preserve' (five examples), 'reduce spendings' (two examples), 'adjust to cost structure' (two examples) are used most often. Apart from them, expressions like 'to eliminate costs', 'to align expenses', 'to draw down', 'to slash expenditures', 'to defer expenditures' are used one time each.

The next biggest group consists of 11 examples and includes euphemisms that are used to replace the notion of 'crisis'. The most often used examples (three instances in each group) are 'challenges/challenging', and 'time'. In the first sub-group, the crisis (either a mass layoff or serious financial problems) is substituted with 'challenging period' or 'economic challenges'. Speaking about the second group, the crisis is substituted with the word 'time', accompanied by various

adjectives that provide characteristics of this time, e.g. 'difficult time', 'time of incredible uncertainty and instability', 'extraordinary time'. The notion of crisis is also substituted by euphemisms 'downturn' and 'market disruption/limitation', with two examples in each sub-group. In one case the crisis was referred to as 'shock', the conventional meaning of which is 'a strong feeling of surprise'.

One of the groups consists of nine instances of euphemisms that are used instead of the verb 'to handle', usually when referring to the process of managing the problematic situation. The euphemisms used are 'to navigate', 'to weather the storm', 'to work our way through', and 'to move through'.

The group of euphemisms that replace the notion of 'decrease' consists of eight examples. The most often used euphemism in this group is 'adverse impact', which was used four times, the meaning of which can be defined as 'the powerful negative effect'. It is followed by 'slowdown', the conventional meaning of which is 'a reduction in speed or activity' with three instances, and 'reversal', which was used just once, and the conventional meaning of which is 'a change of something so that it is the opposite of what it was'.

Another group of euphemisms consists of six examples, and they are used to replace the process of 'losing money', which is a rather upsetting event. With two instances each, the process is replaced by expressions 'to materially affect' and 'financial impact'. Other expressions, e.g. 'revenues has declined' and 'incur and aggregate of costs', are used once.

Lastly, the group of euphemisms that denote 'to finance' consists of five examples in total. In two instances the process of financing is replaced by 'support', conventional meaning of which is 'to help or encourage somebody/something'. Expressions 'to access financial markets', 'to raise additional liquidity', 'to take advantage of subsidy programs' are used one time each.

The rest of the groups of euphemisms consist of no more than three examples, therefore, no clear tendency to euphemize these terms can be outlined. However, it gives an opportunity to see what words and expressions companies try to avoid in their press releases. For example, when describing the problematic situation, in three cases companies replace 'very difficult' with expressions like 'extremely challenging' or just 'challenging', the conventional meaning of which is 'difficult in an interesting way that tests your ability'. When speaking about financial matters and referring to the process of 'not charging money' from someone, in three cases companies tend to avoid that expression and replace it with 'to forbear from exercising remedies' or call the action as 'forbearance of taxes', the conventional meaning of which is 'being patient and kind towards other people, especially when they have done something wrong'.

Among other cases of softening the meaning of expressions with negative connotation, 'to restrict' is substituted with 'to rationalize routes' (with the conventional meaning 'to find or try to

find a logical reason’); ‘to pay’ is substituted with ‘to refinance the existing debt’ (with the conventional meaning ‘to borrow money in order to pay a debt’); ‘taking away’ is substituted with ‘the forfeiture [of the right]’ (with the conventional meaning ‘the act of giving something up’); ‘to reject’ is substituted with ‘did not become available’, ‘infectious’ is substituted with ‘communicable’, and ‘drastically’ is substituted with ‘in profound ways’ (conventionally meaning ‘greatly’).

Other interesting findings that cannot be grouped because of their relative complexity are ‘there is no playbook’ meaning that the company have not prepared for the crisis and do not have an action plan; ‘hotels at near 100% vacancy’ meaning that the hotels are empty; and ‘workers in transition to their next opportunity’ when referring to employees who lost their jobs. Interestingly, all three examples were used by one company, Tripadvisor, and stand out among other euphemistic expressions. Another interesting remark should be made about the ‘unprecedented’ that is used nine times in total by four different companies when referring to the unclear and unstable times or a crisis. Even though the word is not a euphemism, Rachel Arndt notes that ‘repetition is making it begin to sound like one’ (Online 6). She also notes that the word is losing its meaning due to being used too often, although correctly.

Euphemisms represent a very small share of the language of press releases, meaning that companies do not oversaturate their texts with ambiguous words and expressions. This classification presents the main set of ideas that might seem upsetting to readers and are, therefore, replaced by companies. Moreover, it can be seen that companies use similar euphemisms for each notion; however, in some cases, these concepts are replaced by original, unexpected choices. Although the grouping shows what ideas and concepts general public might be sensitive to, it does not provide an understanding of how euphemisms can be created and what ways of formation are preferred by companies. In order to analyze existing ways to construct euphemisms, a second classification was performed, based on the Warren’s (1992) classification.

### **2.3. Formation patterns**

As a second part of the analysis, euphemisms and euphemistic expression are put into groups according to their formation patterns, which are outlined by Warren (1992). Overall, there are ten groups of euphemisms, and they are particularizations, implications, overstatements, understatement, derivations, idioms, metaphors, negations, metonymy, and compounds. The group of idioms has not been originally included in the classification; however, the presence of such euphemisms allowed to put them into a separate group. What is more, some euphemisms have been put into several groups because more than one formation pattern was applied.

The biggest group in this classification is the group of particularizations, and it consists of 25 euphemisms, e.g. 'shock', when referring to a crisis or other major problems; 'downturn' (conventionally meaning 'a fall in the amount of business'), which is used to replace the term 'decrease'; 'transformation' (conventionally meaning 'a complete change') and 'reorganization', which are used to speak about the process of closing physical stores and reducing overall number of retail outlets; and 'help', 'support', when speaking about financial matters, money in particular. As the name of the group suggests, these words have to be particularized, i.e. put into specific context, in order to acquire novel, euphemistic meaning. If taken out of context, the words have only their conventional meanings.

The second biggest group consists of 12 instances of implications, i.e. euphemisms, in order to receive the intended meaning of which readers have to make several associations steps. The group consists of expressions like 'smaller team', 'extremely challenging', 'additional cash'. In the case of the expression 'smaller team', which used to replace the verb 'to lay off', the meaning is evident and logically suggests that some workers have been dismissed, which resulted in a smaller team of workers. However, this fact is not stated explicitly; instead, other words are used to denote this process, thus creating a euphemistic expression. When describing a crisis situation, an expression 'extremely challenging time' is used, which is a rather soft way to characterize it. Readers might understand the implied meaning behind the expression, but yet again the word 'crisis' is not stated directly. Another example, 'additional cash' can be linked to financial matter, namely financial sources. Instead of saying 'money' directly, an expression is used, the meaning of which readers have to decipher independently.

The next group consists of nine examples of overstatements, e.g. 'furlough' (conventionally meaning 'to give a permission to leave their duties'), 'put on Off Duty Status', 'refinance' (conventionally meaning 'to borrow money in order to pay the debt'), 'preserve liquidity'. Euphemisms like 'furlough' and 'put on Off Duty Status' are used to speak about laying off employees; while 'refinance' and 'preserve liquidity' relate to financial matters, namely the process of paying for something, and saving money. Overstatements can also be classified as positive euphemisms, i.e. euphemisms that make a term appear better than it is, make it sound more valuable.

The group of understatements consists of five instances, namely 'leaving employees', 'communicable', 'challenging period', 'difficult time', and 'revenues has declined'. In contrast with overstatements, euphemisms in this group can be classified as negative euphemisms, because they mitigate seriousness of the matter. The expression 'leaving employees' is used when speaking about dismissed workers; however, the euphemism does not reflect the situation precisely. Highly contagious virus is called 'communicable' (conventionally meaning 'than can be passed to other

people'), a major crisis is replaced by 'challenging period' and 'difficult time', whereas huge financial losses incurred by crisis are substituted by 'decline in revenues'. The euphemisms allow readers to understand the meaning, but do not present the whole depth and scale of the problem.

The next most often used way to create euphemisms is derivation. The group of derivations consists of five instances, all of the Latin origin, and they are 'materially', which is derived from *materia* (meaning 'matter') and has a suffix -ly; 'communicable', which is derived from *communicare* (meaning 'share') and has a suffix -able; 'consolidating', which is derived from *consolidare* (meaning 'combine into a whole') and has a verb suffix -ing; 'optimize', which is derived from *optimus* (meaning 'best') and has a verb suffix -ize; and 'rationalize', which is derived from *ratio* (meaning 'to reason') and has a verb suffix -ize. Meanings of the Latin words suit the context that is set in press releases; therefore, the derivations are used as euphemisms and deliver the message. The examples partially fit Warren's (1992) understanding of derivation; however, they do fit the expanded description provided by Samoskaite (2011), where it is specified that derivation involves adding affixes to existing lexemes.

The next group consists of three instances of idioms, e.g. 'to weather the storm', 'to work our way through', and 'to move through'. All of the examples are used to speak about the way companies handle the crisis and deal with its detrimental consequences.

The group of metaphorical euphemisms consists of two examples, which are 'liquidity' meaning money, and 'parting ways' meaning laying off employees. In the first case, the euphemism is formed based on the conceptual metaphor MONEY IS LIQUID, which suggests that the money can transform easily. The second example is based on the conceptual metaphor EMPLOYMENT IS A JOURNEY. In this case, work relationship is being viewed as a shared journey, thus its end is viewed as parting ways.

The group of negations consists of two examples, and they are 'support did not become available' and 'deferring payments'. Both euphemisms are used in relation to financial matters, speaking about the government support and ways to cut the expenses.

Two instances of metonymies are found, namely 'market disruption' and 'to access financial markets'. Both examples are used when speaking about money, and they employ the pattern 'general for specific'. 'Market disruption' is used instead of stating that companies have experienced a sharp decrease in revenues along with the financial losses by substituting the term 'money' by a more general 'market', which includes money as well. The second example, 'to access financial markets', is similar to the first one, and the term 'money' is replaced by a general 'markets', however this time it is more specified, namely that the company speaks about financial matters.

Lastly, the group of compounds consists of only one example, which is ‘adverse impact’. In this case two words have been combined into a phrase which is used instead of saying ‘decrease’.

It can be seen that companies employ a variety of ways to construct euphemisms, either consciously or unconsciously. The variability among patterns does make press releases sound natural yet professional, as well as replace as many sensitive words as possible. In some instances, the use of different formation patterns allows companies to be creative and come up with unique, previously unfamiliar, euphemistic expressions.

#### **2.4. Interpretation of Findings. Euphemised Concepts**

The term ‘lay off’ is most often replaced with the verb ‘to reduce [the workforce]’, or the noun ‘[staff] reductions’. The fact of dismissing people is avoided, and the expression implies that something (a team of staff, for example) just got smaller in size/volume. Interestingly, the words ‘reduction’ or ‘to reduce’ are paired with inanimate objects like ‘workforce’, ‘staffing levels’, ‘headcount’, which do not associate with live people, someone that could get hurt. Thus, the attention is not focused on the harm done to workers who are laid off.

The second most used euphemism used for a layoff, ‘to furlough’, creates a sense of elevation of the term. A furlough implies that the loss of the job is temporary; however, in such unstable times the period of a furlough cannot be stated or even predicted adequately. The term highlights the special status of being temporarily unemployed; however, a person on a furlough is still legally considered as employed and is eligible to receiving work pay (Online 7).

Then, the verbs ‘align’ or ‘adjust’ are used in combination with inanimate objects ‘labor’, ‘network’, ‘staffing levels’. The use of inanimate objects is the same as in the first sub-group, whereas the verbs suggest that the undertaken process (laying off employees) is a necessary adjustment and a mere reaction to the challenging situation.

The next most often verbs are ‘to eliminate’, ‘to leave’, and ‘to exit’. The verb ‘to eliminate’ is only used with inanimate objects, once again taking the focus away from live people, as ‘eliminating jobs’ sounds less harsh than ‘eliminate workers’ (which also has a completely different meaning). The action verbs ‘to leave’ and ‘to exit’ are used, and the workers are the ones who performed the action. ‘Leaving employees’ creates the sense as if workers left voluntarily, thus partly taking responsibility off the company. The adjective ‘impacted’, which is used just as often as the verbs mentioned above, eliminates any association with a job loss, rather creating a feeling of an effect made, something that cannot be controlled.

Some other euphemistic expressions are used just once, and each company comes up with its own way to substitute the term of laying off employees. An expression ‘to put on Off Duty Status’

implies that the job is affected temporarily, as if saying that it is 'on hold'; 'parting ways' creates a sense of a phase in human relationships when the two need to separate. The last example, 'termination of employees', however, does not sound subtle. On the contrary, it is so poorly used that causes associations with the death of people, rather than losing their jobs.

The next most often euphemized term is 'a closure' which is related to going bankrupt. Instead of saying 'the organization went bankrupt' companies use structures like 'the organization commenced on its reorganization/transformation/restructuring process'. Both 'reorganization' and 'transformation' create a rather positive tone of the text because they are associated with a process of changing, becoming better. The 'reorganization' itself means that the organization remains the same, with some changes introduced within it, thus implying that it remained whole, unharmed. The 'transformation' itself is a pleasant process, which implies that after changing, the company will become better, stronger, acquire new features. Another verb, 'to right-size', sounds positive on the account of the word 'right'. Pop (2010b:148) states that 'the term "rightsizing" implied that companies should determine and maintain only right employment for its requirements and increase their efficiency and reputation'. The same effect is reached when applied to the size of the store presence, and it also implies that something is done 'in a right way', in accordance with a specific situation, and is, therefore, not wrong or harmful. A verb with a similar effect is used as well, which is 'to optimize'. The word creates positive associations because of its shared etymology with the word 'optimism' (from Latin *optimus* – best), thus shifting the readers' perception in a required way. The word also suggests that the decisions taken are best suited to the crisis situation, which turns them into advantages.

The topic of money has always been a sensitive one, which is proven here by a large number of euphemisms used to replace the term. Replacing the term 'money' with such words as 'help', 'assistance', creates the sense of cooperating with someone, interacting with somebody in order to get help, which could be interpreted as a manifestation of humanity. Other examples of euphemisms are more focused on expenses, costs, and what could be done to them in order to make more money. Thus, the company's actions are perceived as pro-active, and the focus is put not on the money itself, but on eliminating the obstacles between the company and its financial well-being.

The term 'crisis' is almost never stated explicitly, and is often replaced by the word 'challenge'. Nowadays, the word is used very often across different settings in order to speak about opportunities. Thus, the readers' attention is moved from seeing a crisis as a problem, but rather as an opportunity for growth and development. Needless to say, such an approach creates a more positive sounding text and encourages readers to find great things in the worst situations. The word 'time' is also used multiple times, which is more neutral and does not evoke any specific

associations, neither positive nor negative. If the financial aspect of a crisis needs to be addressed, words 'downturn' or 'disruption' are used as more elevated terms.

The notions of 'decrease', 'losing money', and 'to finance', are replaced by neutral expressions that fit the original meaning. Euphemisms like 'a slowdown', 'adverse impact', 'materially affect', 'financial impact', 'to access financial markets' sound professional, and do not evoke certain feelings.

As mentioned previously, euphemisms, as linguistic tools, demonstrate what topics and issues people are being sensitive about during a specific period of time in history. From the analysis performed, it can be seen that nowadays, specifically in the business environment, topics related with one's employment or lack thereof, finance and money, as well as crisis situations are seen as upsetting or sensitive. In their press releases companies seem to use euphemisms for similar concepts or ideas which makes this conclusion valid.

It would be fair to conclude that even though euphemisms decrease transparency of a press release to some extent, and from the first sight contradict with the aims that companies have, they account for only 1,4% of the whole corpus, which is why they are not detrimental to the message that is conveyed through press releases. In this particular research, they are mostly used to protect readers' feelings, rather than with an intent to mislead the audience. It would be worth to note that in most cases it seems like the euphemisms were used unconsciously, by choosing words that sound conventional and very appropriate in the business context, and make press release sound polite.

## **2.5. Interpretation of Findings. Formation Patterns.**

The biggest group of euphemisms, based on the way they are formed, is the group of particularizations. That means that the most often used way to create euphemisms is to put common words into a specific context, namely press releases published during a crisis, thus creating a novel, euphemistic meaning of the word.

For example, words like 'shock', 'transformation', 'assistance', or 'elimination' each has its own conventional meaning which does not give readers any specifics of the situation. In order for the word to make sense it had to be particularized. For instance, the conventional meaning of the word 'shock' is 'a sudden upsetting or surprising event', but once put into a context, i.e. particularized, it becomes evident that 'shock' means 'crisis'. The abundance of such euphemisms can be justified with the fact that common words do not arouse any negative feelings among readers, and can, therefore, act as euphemisms. What is more, words like that are often used by potential readers, which makes a press release reader-friendly, and allows companies to speak to the audience in the language that is familiar to them.

The next biggest group consists of implications, which makes it the second most often used way to assign words with a new, euphemistic meaning. Even though the meaning is delivered successfully, the fact is not stated explicitly. In order to understand the implied meaning of such euphemisms, the reader has to make several steps and create associations. For example, the reader can understand that by saying 'drawing down' the company is referring to it using financial resources by creating logical association between the process of reducing something via spending and the process of using money.

The next most frequently used pattern is expressing euphemisms in forms of overstatements, i.e. making specific terms seem better than they are, present them in a more respectful way, thus protecting readers' feelings. For example, instead of saying that the workers have lost their jobs, companies opt for terms like 'furlough' and 'Off Duty Status', which sound more professional and valuable. By creating a noble tone around the fact of being unemployed, companies try not to offend affected people. Euphemisms like 'refinance' and 'preserve liquidity' allow organizations to beautify casual topics related to money matters and routine financial activities. In addition to that, the presence of overstatements help to make press releases sound more sophisticated, enhancing the professional image of the company.

In contrast to overstatements, euphemisms that are formed like understatements are used less often. The use of such euphemisms help companies mitigate the seriousness of several upsetting topics, e.g. unemployment, crisis, financial losses. On the other hand, understatements express the meaning in the most unclear way, when compared to other euphemisms, assuming that companies are not being frank in their communication, and this feature could be the reason they are used less often. What is more, understatements leave room for individual interpretation, since they do not state facts explicitly and do not reflect the seriousness of the problem. For example, a phrase 'leaving employees' does not precisely present the fact that the employees are laid off. Instead, some readers might think that the decision to leave was voluntary, which is not the case. 'Communicable' as a substitute for 'infectious' lessens the degree to which the disease is contagious. Calling a crisis 'challenging times' or 'difficult times' hardly presents the problem in all its depth, providing readers an option to decide what they consider to be challenging or difficult.

The next most used way to create euphemisms is to derive it from another word. In this research, all euphemisms in the group are derived from Latin words and have different suffixes. The effect created is similar to the effect of the overstatements, which is to maintain a professional tone throughout the text.

Another way to create euphemisms is to use idioms and metaphors. The presence of these devices makes texts more live, creative, which can partially divert readers' attention from the problem in discussion. For example, the seriousness of the upsetting events that are discussed in the

press releases is decreased when a catchy 'to weather the storm' is used. Metaphorical euphemisms, in their turn, add to the play with associations.

Lastly, the least used ways to create euphemisms are to use negations, metonymies, and compounds. The avoidance of using negation could be explained with the fact that negative prefixes, as in 'deferring expenditures', and negative verbs, as in 'did not become available', lead to negative association around them, which is not a desired outcome in crisis communication. Since companies are aiming at creating a positive outlook on the problem and assure the stakeholders in the company's well-being, negations are not preferred.

The variability among ways to create euphemisms demonstrates that companies do use euphemisms in their press releases, specifically during a crisis, and use different approaches to replacing different concepts. Using different formation patterns also enables companies create new euphemistic expression, which might not be used by other companies, thus standing out and making press releases more appealing to general audience.

## CONCLUSIONS

In current, constantly changing and often unstable business environment crises occur regularly and affect virtually every operating company. Global or local, crises are potential threats to the well-being of companies. Clear and transparent communication with the stakeholders is of paramount importance to companies. A press release has been one of the tools most often used by business to speak to the public while undergoing a series of unpleasant changes. However, even though as a genre press release has retained its typical textual structures, its language has changed. This particular research was aimed at analyzing the language used in press releases and specifically the use of euphemisms in press releases during a crisis. Two research questions were set in order to achieve the aim, namely what are the most often euphemized terms and notions in press releases that are issued as a response to a crisis, and what pattern is used most often to create a euphemism.

Reviewing the existing research on the topic of press releases and euphemisms, it was found out that a crisis is a complex event with multiple aspects to analyze, therefore, to overcome it, companies should apply proper management techniques. Being a big threat, the crisis can result in financial losses and instability within the company, and inefficient communication with the stakeholders during such challenging times can only add to the detrimental effect. If a company fails to address the issue publicly and reassure the audience that the situation is under control, the company is most likely to lose the trust of its partners, shareholders, and, most importantly, customers. This leads to a conclusion that crisis communication is one of the key components of an effective crisis management strategy.

It was concluded that one of the most widely used genre in the field of crisis communication is a press release. Although used to communicate positive news such as the launch of a new product or the opening of a new production site, a press release has proven to be effective also during crises. Not only does it inform about unfortunate events, such as the mass termination of employment or significant financial losses, it also aims to reassure the readers that the problem is under control and the company remains to be of value to the community. To inform and persuade the readers language of press releases should be direct and unambiguous. Being honest and transparent in their press releases companies gain trust of their stakeholders. However, taking into consideration the fact that public nowadays is sensitive about a range of topics, the language of press release has to be chosen with extreme caution. Being 'politically correct' and considering public sensitivity affects the choice of words in press releases and helps to avoid upsetting the readers.

The corpus consisted of 24 press releases issued by companies that went through a crisis situation and had to address the problems publicly, namely companies Hertz, L'Occitane,

AirCanada, TripAdvisor, Lyft, WarnerBros Entertainment, Volvo Group, Hyatt Hotels Corporation, Under Armour, Marriott International, and Uber. The texts were retrieved from the web-pages of the companies, and they were issued between April 2020 and January 2021, thus reflecting modern tendencies of using euphemisms in crisis communication.

After compiling a corpus of press releases issued by companies during the crisis, it was found that euphemisms account for just about 1,4% of the whole corpus, which is why their use is not detrimental to delivering the message. Although companies use euphemisms in their texts, they do so not often, and, therefore, the transparency of the text is not decreased. The euphemisms used in the collected press releases were created in different ways, for example, some appeared in form of implications, particularizations, hyperboles, litotes, or by being derived from words of Latin origin. The use of different formation patterns resulted in novel, euphemistic meanings of the conventional words and expressions, when, for example, a 'transformation' actually meant 'closing stores'. It was also observed that companies tend to use euphemisms speaking about several specific matters, which means that these topics are currently sensitive in modern society, if not tabooed. These topics were mostly connected with money and termination of employment.

Overall, it can be stated that the companies use euphemisms to their advantage, reassuring the readers of the company's well-being and its ability to handle the situation, or, in other words, influence the perception of the problem in discussion. The collected press releases contained several positive euphemisms, thus presenting upsetting facts in a more favorable way and changing the way the readers perceive the problem, crisis.

The findings of the research can be considered reliable since a clear tendency to euphemize concepts connected with employment and/or money was noticed among a number of companies, who do not operate in the same field and have different audiences. However, it can be said that the research was limited with the number of press releases collected. In addition, the limitation was also posed by methodology, as ideally it requires several researchers to avoid subjective interpretation of euphemisms. This deficiency might be partly overcome by longitudinal research and working out a stricter methodology. The research could be further expanded to analyzing how the use of euphemisms in press releases has changed over time by comparing press releases issued, for example, 10 years ago with the ones issued recently. It would be recommended to collect a bigger corpus of press releases as well as look for a more reliable way to determine whether a word can be labeled as a euphemism or not.

## THESES

1. Crisis management is a complex process which requires special knowledge from various areas and aims at preventing and neutralizing the results of a crisis.
2. Crisis communication is the key element of a crisis communication plan which shape the stakeholders' perception of the problem and help to affect the public opinion.
3. Euphemisms are linguistic tools that through changing the tone of the text and the way the information is presented can be used both to mislead and protect the audience.
4. Euphemisms account for a very small share of the language of press releases, which is why they have no significant effect on the transparency of the texts.
5. Companies prefer positive euphemisms (overstatements) over negative euphemisms (understatements) in press releases during the crisis in order to form a more positive perception of the problem.
6. Companies use particularization, implication, derivation as ways to form a euphemism or a euphemistic expression, which results in a number of creative, novel meanings of familiar words.
7. The most sensitive topics to be addressed and discussed publicly in the modern society are money, finance, employment.

Word count: 17 808

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### **Analysed Texts**

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## Appendix 1: Euphemized Concepts

<b>Laying off people (43)</b>	
<b>Total: 13</b>	HERTZ: workforce reductions (2) / Reduce staffing levels (1) AIRCANADA: workforce (workplace) reductions (3) TRIPADVISOR: reductions in the workforce (2)/ reducing management layers (1) / Reduce overall headcount (1) VOLVO: staff reductions (1) / reduce the white-collar workforce (1) WARNERBROS: remove layers (1)
<b>Total: 11</b>	HERTZ: employee furlough programs (3) AIRCANADA: to furlough (3) TRIPADVISOR: on furlough (3) LYFT: to furlough (1) MARRIOTT: to furlough (1)
<b>Total: 5</b>	HERTZ: align staffing levels with demand (3) / align labor (1) AIRCANADA: Adjusting its network (1)
<b>Total: 3</b>	TRIPADVISOR: Eliminate the roles (1) WARNERBROS: eliminate jobs (1) UBER: eliminate roles (1)
<b>Total: 3</b>	TRIPADVISOR: They exit the organization (1) WARNERBROS: leaving employees (1) HERTZ: departure of employees (1)
<b>Total: 4</b>	AIRCANADA: Impacted employees (1) TRIPADVISOR: Impacted employees (1) / Job impacts (1) HERTZ: many good people would be affected (1)
<b>Total: 1</b>	AIRCANADA: To put on Off Duty Status (1)
<b>Total: 1</b>	LYFT: termination [of employees] (1)
<b>Total: 1</b>	WARNERBROS: Resulting in a smaller team (1)
<b>Total: 1</b>	HYATT: Parting ways (1)
<b>Closure (17)</b>	
<b>Total: 3</b>	HERTZ: Reorganization [process] (3)
<b>Total: 3</b>	L'OCCITANE: A transformation (3)
<b>Total: 3</b>	L'OCCITANE: Right-size its brick-and-mortar presence (2) HERTZ: Right-size the fleet (1)
<b>Total: 2</b>	L'OCCITANE: To optimize store footprint (2)
<b>Total: 2</b>	TRIPADVISOR: To reduce real estate footprint (2)

	<b>Total:2</b>	L'OCCITANE: Restructuring [of the store lease portfolio] (1) UA: restructuring initiative (1)
	<b>Total:1</b>	WARNERBROS: consolidating separate organizations (1)
	<b>Total:1</b>	L'OCCITANE: Contemplated exit of unprofitable locations (1)
<b>Money (15)</b>		
	<b>Total:5</b>	L'OCCITANE: Ample liquidity (2) AIRCANADA: liquidity (3)
	<b>Total:4</b>	HERTZ: assistance (2) AIRCANADA: assistance (2)
	<b>Total:2</b>	HERTZ: Sufficient support (1) / Financial support (1)
	<b>Total:1</b>	HERTZ: Additional cash (1)
	<b>Total:1</b>	HERTZ: New borrowings (1)
	<b>Total:1</b>	AIRCANADA: Additional help (1)
	<b>Total:1</b>	AIRCANADA: Financial resources (1)
<b>Saving money (15)</b>		
	<b>Total:5</b>	HERTZ: preserve liquidity (4) AIRCANADA: preserve cash (1)
	<b>Total:2</b>	HERTZ: Reduce spending (2)
	<b>Total:2</b>	HERTZ: Adjustments to cost structure (1) UBER: adjust to cost structure (1)
	<b>Total:1</b>	HERTZ: aggressively managing costs (1)
	<b>Total:1</b>	HERTZ: Eliminate costs (1)
	<b>Total:1</b>	HERTZ: Slash expenditures (1)
	<b>Total:1</b>	HERTZ: Align expenses (1)
	<b>Total:1</b>	HERTZ: Deferring expenditures (1)
	<b>Total:1</b>	AIRCANADA: Drawing down (1)
<b>Crisis (11)</b>		
	<b>Total:3</b>	WARNERBROS: Challenging period (1) UA: challenging time (1) LYFT: ongoing economic challenges (1)
	<b>Total:3</b>	L'OCCITANE: Difficult time (1) TRIPADVISOR: time of incredible uncertainty and instability (1) / extraordinary time (1)

	<b>Total:2</b>	TRIPADVISOR: prolonged and protracted downturn (2)
	<b>Total:2</b>	HERTZ: Market disruption (1) / Market was limited (1)
	<b>Total:1</b>	UA: unanticipated shock (1)
<b>To handle (9)</b>		
	<b>Total:4</b>	HERTZ: navigate the uncertainty (1) AIRCANADA: navigate through this crisis (1) TRIPADVISOR: navigate challenges (2)
	<b>Total:3</b>	HERTZ: To weather a [...] recovery (1) TRIPADVISOR: to weather this storm (1) UA: to weather the storm (1)
	<b>Total:1</b>	HERTZ: To move through this pandemic (1)
	<b>Total:1</b>	HERTZ: work our way through (1)
<b>Decrease (8)</b>		
	<b>Total: 4</b>	HERTZ: adverse impact on travel demand (4)
	<b>Total: 3</b>	HERTZ: Slowdown in demand (1) / travel slowdown (2)
	<b>Total: 1</b>	HERTZ: the reversal in customer demand (1)
<b>To finance (5)</b>		
	<b>Total:2</b>	HERTZ: To support (1) L'OCCITANE: To support (1)
	<b>Total:1</b>	AIRCANADA: To access financial markets (1)
	<b>Total:1</b>	AIRCANADA: To raise additional liquidity (1)
	<b>Total:1</b>	TRIPADVISOR: Taking advantage of government subsidy programs (1)
<b>Losing money (5)</b>		
	<b>Total:2</b>	HERTZ: materially affect (1) / be materially affected (1)
	<b>Total:2</b>	AIRCANADA: The financial impact (2)
	<b>Total:1</b>	HERTZ: revenues have sharply declined (1)
<b>Not to charge (3)</b>		
		HERTZ: Forbear from exercising remedies (1) / Forbearance (1)

<b>Total:3</b>	AIRCANADA: forbearance [of taxes] (1)
<b>Very difficult (3)</b>	
<b>Total:3</b>	HERTZ: Extremely challenging (1) AIRCANADA: extremely challenging (1) WARNERBROS: challenging [period] (1)
<b>Restrict (1)</b>	
<b>Total:1</b>	AIRCANADA: Rationalize routes (1)
<b>To pay (1)</b>	
<b>Total:1</b>	AIRCANADA: To refinance existing debt
<b>Taking away (1)</b>	
<b>Total:1</b>	HERTZ: The forfeiture of the [...] right (1)
<b>Reject (1)</b>	
<b>Total:1</b>	HERTZ: Did not become available (1)
<b>Infectious (1)</b>	
<b>Total:1</b>	AIRCANADA: Communicable disease (1)
<b>Drastically (1)</b>	
<b>Total:1</b>	TRIPADVISOR: In profound ways (1)

## Appendix 2: Euphemism Formation Patterns

<b>Particularizations (25)</b>	impacted / affected employees
	Reduce [ real estate footprint]
	contemplated exit
	materially affect
	financial impact
	slowdown [in demand]
	reversal [in customer demand]
	reorganization [process]
	a transformation
	to right-size [its brick-and-mortar presence]
	optimize [store footprint]
	restructuring [of the store lease portfolio]
	consolidating [separate organizations]
	downturn
	a shock
	assistance
	[additional] help
	[financial] support
	[financial] resources
	to navigate [uncertainty]/[through crisis]
	rationalize [routes]
	workforce reductions
	to align [staffing levels]
	to eliminate [the roles]
	termination [of employees]
<b>Implications (12)</b>	reduce spending
	eliminate costs
	managing costs
	slash expenditures
	borrowings
	deferring expenditures
	extremely challenging
	drawing down
	smaller team
	to raise additional liquidity

	taking advantage of government subsidy programs
	additional cash
<b>Overstatements (hyperboles) (9)</b>	to furlough
	to refinance [existing debts]
	the forfeiture
	to put on Off Duty Status
	preserve liquidity
	adjust to cost structure
	align expenses
	forbearance [from exercising remedies]
	in profound ways
<b>Derivations (5)</b>	materially [affected] ( <i>materia</i> → matter)
	communicable [disease] ( <i>communicare</i> → share)
	consolidating [separate organizations]( <i>consolidare</i> → combine into a whole)
	optimize [store footprint]( <i>optimus</i> → best)
	rationalize [routes] ( <i>ratio</i> → to reason)
<b>Understatement (litotes) (5)</b>	leaving employees
	communicable [disease]
	challenging period
	difficult time / extraordinary time
	revenues has declined
<b>Idioms (3)</b>	to weather the storm (=to survive hard times)
	to work our way through
	to move through [this pandemic]
<b>Metonymy (2)</b>	market disruption (general for specific)
	to access financial markets (general for specific)
<b>Negations (2)</b>	[support] did not become available
	Deferring expenditures
<b>Metaphors (2)</b>	liquidity (MONEY IS LIQUID)
	parting ways (EMPLOYMENT IS A JOURNEY)

<b>Compounds (1)</b>	adverse impact

## Dokumentārā lapa

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