

# Cultural Differences in Chinese and English Euphemisms

## DIFFÉRENCES CULTURELLES DANS L'EUPHÉMISME CHINOIS ET ANGLAIS

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**Abstract:** Euphemism, a common linguistic phenomenon in different cultures, is defined on the lexical-level in this thesis. It refers to “the substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive expression for one that may offend people or suggest something unpleasant”. This thesis is to make a contrastive study of English euphemisms and Chinese euphemisms by means of the relevant linguistic theories, by which we conclude that euphemism is a linguistic, and particularly a cultural phenomenon. Its development is the outcome of various socio-psychological factors. The study of English euphemisms will surely shed light on English teaching in China.

**Key words:** Euphemism; Culture; Intercultural communication

**Resumé:** L'euphémisme, un phénomène linguistique commun dans des cultures différentes, est défini dans cette thèse au niveau lexical. Il se réfère à la "substitution d'une expression agréable ou inoffensive à celui qui peut offenser les gens ou suggérer quelque chose de désagréable". Cette thèse est de faire une étude contrastive sur l'euphémismes en anglais et en chinois en utilisant des théories linguistiques pertinentes, à partir desquelles nous concluons que l'euphémisme est un phénomène linguistique, et en particulier culturel. Son développement est le résultat de divers facteurs socio-psychologiques. L'étude des euphémismes anglais va sûrement faire la lumière sur l'enseignement de l'anglais en Chine.

**Mots-clés:** euphémisme; culture; communication interculturelle

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Euphemism is defined on the lexical-level in this thesis. It refers to “the substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive expression for one that may offend people or suggest something unpleasant”. By making a

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contrastive study of English euphemisms and Chinese euphemisms, this thesis attempts to explore cultural similarities and differences reflected in English and Chinese euphemisms.

## **2. CLASSIFICATIONS OF EUPHEMISMS**

### **2.1 Traditional and Stylistic Euphemisms**

Semantically, euphemisms can be divided into traditional euphemisms and stylistic euphemisms.

Traditional euphemisms refer to some indirect expressions of linguistic taboos. They were created because topics such as life, death, disease, sex and secretions in some cultures were forbidden to be mentioned openly and directly. For the sake of pleasantness, people refrained from talking about them in public and tried to use more refined ones to make replacements, euphemism hence developed. For instance, "secretion", a taboo in both English and Chinese languages has got a great number of euphemistic words and expressions, like "answer/feel the nature's call", "go to the bathroom", "spend a penny", "wash one's hand", "do one's urgent business" and "relieve oneself." Such euphemisms embody human being's desire to extricate themselves from barbarism and to become civilized creatures.

The latter category of euphemisms refers to some flattering or more polite words or expressions. In communication, speakers usually feel direct addressing will make the hearers feel uneasy or even hurt on certain occasions. To consolidate the social solidarity, people usually adopt some seemingly exaggerated or beautified addresses. As a result, some dignified equivalents emerge. Take some political terms for example. "Concentration camp" is described as "strategic village", "surprise attack" as "surgical strike", "deliberate bombing" as "accidental delivery of ordnance", and "under-developed countries" as "less developed countries", etc.

### **2.2 Unconscious and Conscious Euphemisms**

All euphemisms, whether traditional or stylistic, can be divided into two classes---unconscious and conscious ones according to whether people remember their original motivations or not. Some euphemisms were developed so long ago that hardly anyone remembers how they were originally motivated. Take "indisposition" for example. The original meaning of the word is "incapacity to deal with something". And its euphemistic meaning is "slight illness or ill health", which has been frequently used for so long that people hardly think of the original meaning. Besides, the word "cemetery" is derived from Greek and originally means "dormitory or sleeping place". However, commonly used as a euphemism for "graveyard" nowadays, it seldom refers to "dormitory or sleeping place".

While some euphemisms are used unconsciously, others are employed consciously. Certain euphemism leads to double thinking when used by people, i.e. it stands for something else. But everyone pretends that the "something else" does not exist. For example, when a lady says that she is going to "powder her nose" or "make a phone call", we should think that her intention is noble and she does not mean to be dishonest by really going to the ladies' room.

### **2.3 Nonce and Sustained Euphemisms**

Some euphemisms are created on impulse on a certain occasion and are never repeated later, while others are coined, reused and ratified by many people and have lasted for generations, or even centuries. In these cases, we have nonce euphemism and sustained euphemism. For instance, most of the euphemisms concerning the Vietnam War, such as "pacification" for "bombing", "defoliation" for "destroying crops" and "police action" for "aggression", are one-day wonders while many euphemisms related to taboo areas have become everlasting terms, and some even become idiomatic expressions.

### **3. PRINCIPLES IN CREATING EUPHEMISMS**

Euphemisms have different forms. Whatever forms they have, they share three basic principles of formation, the distance principle, the relation principle and the pleasantness principle.

#### **3.1 The Distance Principle**

Any linguistic sign is a two-face carrier of sound and meaning. A particular sound stands for a particular meaning, which operates in an arbitrary manner. Out of inward anxieties, conflicts, fears and shames, or for the sake of politeness or self-respect, people consider certain phenomena as taboos, and the linguistic signs referring to these phenomena become taboos as well. In social life, people have to mention the tabooed things many times on various occasions. Direct mention of the tabooed things is considered offensive, shocking, unpleasant or impolite, so people try to use indirect expressions to talk about taboos. Therefore, the creation of euphemism is, as a matter of fact, based upon a psychological distance: people identify linguistic signs with their referents, and taboos with the things they refer to. To eliminate this kind of identical association the most effective way is to widen the distance between signs and their referents, which can be achieved by creating new signs in place of the old ones. As a result, new linguistic signs increase the distance between the signs and their real referents considerably. This is what we call the distance principle--- old wine in a new bottle.

#### **3.2 The Relation Principle**

Generally speaking, the wider the distance between a sign and its real referent, the more euphemistic it appears. However, language is used for communication, so being over-euphemistic means being too vague, which may lead to misunderstanding or breakdown in communication. Therefore, in order to be well understood and to achieve successful communication, people have to observe another important principle in social interaction--- the relation principle, which indicates people cannot choose an expression at random for euphemizing. In other words, the newly coined euphemism must be somewhat related to the old linguistic sign that needs to be euphemized. It must give a clue to the referent as well.

The distance principle requires a greater distance between the newly coined euphemism and its referent, while the relation principle restrains the distance to a reasonable degree, which enables the hearer to understand the speaker in a specific situation.

#### **3.3 The Pleasantness Principle**

Another important principle is the pleasantness principle. However, the so-called pleasantness does not refer to the pleasantness of the sound to the ear, but the pleasantness of a better connotation to the mind. A euphemism is better than a taboo because it inspires a better association in the mind of the hearer. For instance, garbage man is euphemized as "sanitation engineer", or "garbalogist", "skinny" as "slender", "crippled" as "physically handicapped", and the invasion of NATO as "humanitarian assistance", etc.

### **4. A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS OF CHINESE AND ENGLISH EUPHEMISMS**

#### **4.1 Similarities**

##### **4.1.1 In Terms of Psychological Mechanism**

Euphemism reflects the various states of social psychology, in which euphemism, whether English or Chinese, originates. Many factors of social psychology may account for euphemizing, but to avoid taboos, to be polite and to disguise are the most basic and typical ones.

To avoid taboos is the principal psychological basis on which euphemisms are created. In many cultures, the names of gods and devils are taboos and people try to avoid mentioning them directly. That's why English people euphemize the name of "Satan" as "god of this world", "his sable majesty", "old gentleman in black" or "old Harry". They even spell god as "g-d," or "gosh", etc. In this sense, we can say the existence of taboo words or taboo ideas stimulates the creation of euphemism.

Politeness is also an essential psychological foundation on which euphemism is generated. In social interaction, people always try to avoid being impolite or hurting others' feelings in speech. In other words, face saving must be taken into account to keep communication going. "Face is the public self-image that every member of society wants to claim for himself. Such mutual self-interest requires that conversational participants maintain both their own and their interactors' face."<sup>2</sup> But many verbal interactions are potential threats to face, so the communicators attempt to weaken "face threatening" through a series of strategies including euphemisms. e.g. To the criminal, the judge claims "you have been sentenced to five years in prison." However, if he has to mention it in front of the criminal's parents on a private occasion, he would probably say, "Your son has been sent to the big house." or "he is now living at the government's expense." Such strategies for face keeping can be found in the euphemisms for some occupations. e.g. "Hair-dresser" is replaced by "beautician", "bedding worker" by "mattress engineer," and "undertaker" by "funeral director" etc, which are created to "soften the shock of reality" and to satisfy the psychological necessity of those who hold humble jobs, making them feel being treated with "a little, simple, decent respect", thus "to be somebody."

A great many political euphemisms are not to be polite, but to disguise. In international relationships "dressed-up" expressions have been used frequently. In order to conceal the truth, Politicians usually adopt a disguise mechanism. For example, in 1983, after the U.S. sent its armed forces into Grenada, President Reagan showed his irritation with reporters at their frequent use of the word "invasion". "This", he said, "was a rescue mission". Actually, it was Reagan himself who had first called it an invasion. In addition, The American Watergate affair also brought a great many euphemisms into being. e.g. "Containment" for "withholding-information", "plumber" for "burglar", "intelligence-gathering activity" for "the crime of breaking and entering", "White house horror" for "government-sponsored crimes", etc. These euphemistic terms or expressions are referred to by some scholars as "cosmetic words", which perform the function of separating words from truth.

#### 4.1.2 In Terms of Formation

However culturally and historically particular euphemisms may be, English and Chinese euphemisms are similar in some ways, in terms of the linguistic patterns underlying their formations, such as the borrowing of foreign words, the use of understatement etc.

As a matter of fact, euphemizing by means of foreign words is attained through the distance between the foreign language and the native language. People are relatively familiar with their native language and are unfamiliar with a foreign language. So the use of foreign words in place of native ones usually brings about a sense of implicitness and mildness to people. e.g. The English euphemism for "lavatory" is "loo", which is believed to be derived from the French expression "lieut daisance" (place of convenience) or from "waterloo" (place where Napoleon was defeated crushingly). In Chinese, the English word "kiss" is sometimes used to euphemize *jie wen* °.

For the sake of politeness or pleasantness, people often avoid stating something fully. For example, western people usually say "she is plain" rather than "she is ugly". To describe children of low intelligence people use "a bit slow for his age", "Less able" or "under achiever", etc. If someone is mad, he is thought to be "soft in the head"; if someone steals he is described as "taking things without permission". "To be set free from the jail" is euphemized by "to be out of the rehabilitation home", etc.

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<sup>2</sup>. Fasold, Ralph. (2000). *The Sociolinguistics of Language*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

## 4.2 Dissimilarities

Due to the variations of geographical and economical factors, Chinese and western cultures are diversified. And people with different cultural backgrounds would not deal with the same issue in exactly the same way, which will definitely be reflected in the features of their respective languages. This thesis intends to explore these cultural differences by analyzing the typical euphemisms for aging, death and caste in both Chinese and English.

### 4.2.1 Euphemisms for Aging

Senility is an unavoidable natural process and everybody has to confront with the crisis of an advanced age sooner or later. But to people of different cultures, the word "old" carries different connotations.

There are some euphemisms with "old" both in Chinese and English languages. For example, 老师傅 (old worker), 老总 (old manager), 老板 (old boss), 老大 (old brother) in Chinese and "old school" (an orthodox group), "old gentlemen" (the devil), "old fog" (a stubborn person), "old hat" (something out of date) in English. From the examples, it can be interpreted that Chinese euphemisms concerning "old" are honorifics, showing politeness and respect towards the addressees, while those of English are derogatory. It seems that English people show less preference towards the word "old" than Chinese people do.

Western people do not like being addressed as "old" although they have actually passed their prime time, while Chinese people don't seem to care much about it. As a matter of fact, the word "old" in the eyes of the western people is more concerning with something out of date, worn out, out of time or lacking in youthful vigor. "An old man" in this sense, is not only an impolite but also an offensive addressing. Therefore, there is a long list of English euphemisms for "senior citizen", such as "golden age", "advanced age", "the long living", "well-preserved man", etc. In contrary, old people in China are usually called "老(old)先生", "老(old)人家", "老(old)者", "老(old)寿星", which do not imply any impolite or offensive meanings at all.

Most Chinese people assume an affirmative feeling towards the word "old", which is, in most cases, commendatory and used in a favorable sense, for the aged are not neglected in China, where respect and obedience for and to the old are socially regarded as a virtue. Besides, the traditional extended family system has been very popular throughout China's long history. In this way, the aged will not feel lonely at all for three or four generations are living around them.

But in western countries, things are quite different. First of all, unlike Chinese people, the highlighted virtues of western people are individuality and independence. Young men are not supposed to assume the responsibility of taking care of the old. The senior citizens, on the other hand, may not willingly accept the idea that they are incapable of looking after themselves well as a weak and disadvantaged group.

Secondly, the family system of western countries is also significantly different from that of China. The nuclear family is the basic family unit in the west, and children will have their own family as soon as they get married. Their family tie is rather loose. Since they don't live together as a typical extended family does in China, the old people in the west unavoidably receive less care than Chinese old citizens.

However, as the saying goes, every coin has two sides. In spite of those facts presented above, we should also be aware of the following points:

For one thing, although Chinese old people are taken good care of and therefore are not so sensitive to the word "old" as westerners are, it doesn't mean that they are not afraid of being old. On the contrary, they are very conscious of their advanced age as well. A famous Chinese saying, "the sunset is charming, it's near dusk, though" (夕阳无限好, 只是近黄昏) may best interpret what they are thinking and regretting. A reluctance and helplessness towards old age can be felt clearly and vividly.

For another, western people, though being neglected by the young generation, are optimistic about the natural cycling of life, for they think that they have been "matured", "seasoned", and have become a "master" with time. Life has endowed them enough and they can settle for it. That is to say, western people of old age are usually more ambitious and more confident than Chinese old generation. In China, the old are respected but are not trusted with important task. People in their fifties have already "known their doom". Most of them will retreat from "vanity fair". Some of them have to depend on their children both spiritually and materially. In contrary, old people in the west are still active in their careers because they like to be

independent and self-reliant. That's why the proverb "God helps those who help themselves" is so popular in the west.

#### **4.2.2 Euphemisms for Death**

In all societies and almost all languages, "death", the most sensitive and fearful subject people try to avoid mentioning, is an extremely tabooed word. Different people, whichever cultural groups they belong to, can't feel ease about its gravity and dreadfulness.

Both English and Chinese languages have a number of euphemistic expressions to substitute expressions for "death". In English, for example, there are more than seventy euphemisms for death, including "perish", "cease respiration", "go west", "rest in the churchyard", "rest in peace", "pass away" and "go the way of all flesh", etc. And in Chinese, there are also lots of expressions of this kind, such as "归西", "老了", "圆寂", "殉职", "回老家", "见阎王", etc. The concepts of death in both the two cultures are profoundly influenced by their respective religious belief.

China is a multi-religion nationality with Confucianism, Taoism and Chinese Buddhism which enable us to believe that people should regulate their behaviors and conduct good deeds as much as possible. The "good people" will enjoy a peaceful and prosperous life in his next-life while the "bad people" will be fully responsible for the wrongs they committed, for which they will be punished severely.

Christianity is what western people believe in, whose religious belief can be simply illustrated as "in God we trust". In the eyes of the westerners, death means differently for Christians believe that life is bestowed by god. Human beings have to experience the process of evil, degeneration and atonement. Only after they atone for one's original sins could they be saved thereafter and go to heaven, join the majority and be with god, otherwise they will go to the devil and suffer in the dark hell forever.

In terms of the differences, influenced by the feudal patriarchal clan system, ancient Chinese assumed that death of different people was caused out of different reasons and meant differently. Therefore, in China, euphemism for death of the ruling class is different from that of the common people. e.g. Death of the emperor is taken as the collapse of a big mountain, called "驾崩", while death of the common people is just plainly put as "death".

Contrarily, social stratification cannot be seen plainly from English, and the English euphemistic expressions for death are actually categorized by different occupations. e.g. Death of people in the field of communications is called "be cut off", or "ring off." "Pay one's debt of nature.", "cancel one's accounts" and "Pay one's last debt" are obviously the financial euphemisms for death. "Drop the curtain", "switch out the lights", "black out", "fold the final curtain", are used by people engaged in the film industry. "Launch into eternity", "under sailing orders", "slip one's ropes", "hit the rocks" are derived from the sailing world. "Buying a one-way ticket", "hop the last rattler" and "take a one-way trip" show the euphemistic and detached tone of those living in the flying agency.

#### **4.2.3 Euphemism for Caste**

Caste can be used to indicate a great many aspects of our social life, such as high and low, good and bad, fast and slow, expensive and cheap, poor and rich, etc. Western people are very sensitive towards the divisions and callings of different classes. For example, the famous American airline Bald Eagle categorizes the cabin seats into two parts: "the round trip fare is 250 dollars first class and 200 dollars economy class". Apparently, the "economy class" is actually the "second class". Nevertheless, as a mild and indirect saying, "economy class" sounds more considerate and comfortable. Besides, many hotels in western countries are used to dividing their rooms into the following four categories: A. Deluxe; B. First class; C. standard; D. Private rooms. In this way, the embarrassment of being inferior to the first class is naturally erased. It is the same with automobile manufacturing industry. People who are engaged in this business always try to avoid mentioning the word "small". There are altogether cars of four sizes in America: full-size-cars, regular-size-cars, compact cars and sub-compact cars. Here, "compact" is highly preferred to "small".

By contrast, however, Chinese people have a very different idea of this. Most Chinese take it as a pride to own a small car, which symbolizes something delicate and elegant. That's a typical "cultural shock" derived from different feeling towards the same word in two languages. Another distinctive example is

concerning the concept of “cheap”. In China, the ideal goods should at least possess the following requirement: cheap but of good quality. However, in western countries, anything that you name “cheap” won’t sell, as “cheap” in English has an implication of “poor quality and terrible style”. For this reason, westerners tend to use “economy, low cost, realistically prized” instead of “cheap”, which carry a negative meaning in their culture.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Through the contrastive analysis of English and Chinese euphemisms, we can see that euphemism is a linguistic, and particularly a cultural phenomenon. Its development is the outcome of various socio-psychological factors. The study of English euphemisms will surely shed light on the English teaching in China. First, in the teaching of English vocabulary, it is necessary for teachers to draw students’ attention to the understanding and use of those words and expressions with strong cultural connotations; teachers may as well make a bilingual comparison and contrast of such words and expressions, especially those which are not bad in our dictionaries but are to be avoided in the eyes of the British and Americans. As for some very sensitive words and expressions, teachers might as well ask students to consult the relevant dictionaries for them and their corresponding euphemisms. Second, when students do oral practice in class, teachers should tell the students what subjects are tabooed in the daily communication of the British and Americans, in order that the students might be able to avoid asking some rash or blunt questions which may offend the English-speaking people with whom they will probably communicate later. In this sense, the study of euphemism is of great importance and practical value in successful intercultural communication.

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