

Euphemism From Sociolinguistics Perspective

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Abstract

Euphemism is a proper language style that people pursue in social communication in order to reach an ideal communication effect. Euphemism can avoid and soften taboos and sensitive or awkward topics. In every stage and each country, euphemisms are widely used. Thus, the creation and usage of euphemism is a common phenomenon in human language. Because euphemism is used in certain community and is influenced by social-cultural factors, thus, it is heavily marked with social-cultural features. As a special language phenomenon, euphemism not only includes those euphemistic expressions accepted by community members, but also includes the euphemistic communication style that people adopt in specific environment. The use of euphemism varies with the gender, age, social status and occupation, etc., of the social members and euphemism covers various aspects of social culture, including social conventions, traditional morality, religion, social values and politics, etc., which shows that euphemism is deeply rooted in social culture. It is impossible to have a profound understanding of language without referring to social culture.

Key words: Euphemism; Sociolinguistics; Culture

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INTRODUCTION

Euphemism is a widely-used language device. It is

acknowledged that in every language, there are a certain amount of euphemisms. Euphemisms are used in place of some sensitive, unpleasant, disturbing and taboo topics. Enright stated "A language without euphemisms would be a defective instrument of communication" (Enright, 1985, p.29). Hugh Rawson also affirmed "Euphemisms are embedded so deeply in our language that few of us, even those who pride themselves on being plain spoken, ever get through a day without using them" (Rawson, 1981, p.3). With the development of the society, more concerns are given to human rights and privacy and our society is becoming more polite than before. Therefore, in order to keep a good impression, people will certainly resort to using more euphemisms. As is alleged, since 1970s, the biggest change in English, especially in American English, is "Return to euphemism".

Euphemism has been attracting people's attention for a long time. When people want to talk about some sensitive, unpleasant, offensive or taboo topics and want to be polite at the same time, they would probably use euphemisms. When Adam and Eve began to use "fig leaves" to cover up certain parts of their bodies, human beings have already planted the seed for the use of euphemism. That is why some linguists call euphemisms "linguistic fig leaves". Many linguists, sociologists, anthropologists and rhetoricians have noted the important role that euphemism plays in different aspects of real-world communication.

1. DEFINITION OF EUPHEMISM

It is known that euphemism is a form of language intentionally created in social relations to achieve ideal communication. Without them, any language would seem to be vulgar and rude and void of politeness to some degree. In the search for an acceptable definition of euphemism, one is confronted with its different dimensions, each one providing a specific insight into this strategy: the rhetorical, the literary and the linguistic, etc.

The origin of the term euphemism discloses the aim of the device very clearly. *Eu* is from Greek word which means well and *pheme* means speaking, so the word euphemism originally means speaking well. In the vocabulary of any language, synonyms can be found that soften an otherwise coarse or unpleasant idea. Euphemism is sometimes figuratively called “a whitewashing device”. As a special mode of expression, euphemism has been defined differently in different books. Here are some definitions:

Euphemisms are alternatives to dispreferred expressions, and are used in order to avoid possible loss of face. The dispreferred expression may be taboo, fearsome, distasteful, or for some other reasons have too many negative connotations to felicitously execute speaker’s communicative intention on a given occasion (Allan & Burridge, 1991, p.11).

Euphemism is a mild or indirect word or expression substituted for one considered to be too harsh or blunt when referring to something unpleasant or embarrassing (The New Oxford Dictionary of English, 1998, p.634).

Euphemisms are mild, agreeable, or roundabout words used in place of coarse, painful, or offensive ones (Rawson, 1981, p.1).

In a general sense, euphemism is a word or phrase or communication style, which is used in a specific context to soften or conceal something unpleasant. By doing so, euphemism prevents offensiveness, since it no more carries the negative mark of the direct designation. In this sense, euphemism is an inauthentic means of expression, of which the extreme form would be an actual lie. Even though, euphemism cannot simply be equated with lying, since it allows one to speak about uncomfortable subjects and not simply leave them out or replace them by their opposites, it is at the very least an economical way of dealing with the truth, by naming it in a more pleasant way or by focusing on a specific, less distressing detail of it.

2. BASIC FUNCTIONS OF EUPHEMISM

Euphemisms are mostly used in conversation, so the concept of functions of euphemism, understood as its effects, evokes a relationship of reciprocal co-ordination between the speaker’s intention and the hearer’s reception of this strategy. However, it is the speaker who exerts the ultimate control over this co-ordination, since it is up to him to use a euphemism or to decide on a direct designation. In this sense, a specific intention underlies the use of a euphemism, which generally concerns its reception by the hearer. There are two basic functions attained by a euphemism: the “function of concealing” and or the “function of veiling”. The distinction between the two functions is problematic because the two verbs used to name them are synonymous. In fact, a single euphemism can simultaneously fulfill both functions in discourse. This therefore requires an attempt to delimitate the meaning and the range of each function.

2.1 Function of Concealing

If a euphemistic expression fulfils a function of concealing, then there is some fact or topic (or the name it is known by) that is deliberately hidden or left out of the discourse interaction. Again, this decision takes into consideration other factors, such as the fact that there are unmentionable subjects of discourse, e.g. conventionally established taboos and linguistic taboos, and conventions regarding discourse, which submit taboo to avoidance and replacement by euphemism. In other words, the social conditioning of the linguistic expression leads to the need to avoid a certain aspect of a word or concept, which could violate the established norms. In this case, the way out consists in softening that aspect by choosing a less explicit designation, which ensures the respect for those norms. Concealing euphemisms provide the linguistic possibility to regard conventions and thereby to keep them. Examples of concealing euphemisms are fear-based euphemisms such as “growth” for “tumor”, or shame-based alternatives, such as “pass water” for “urinate”. In public discourse, it is also possible to find euphemisms which subscribe to this function: this is the case of vague alternatives for “war” such as “crisis”, “intervention” or “question”. Euphemisms like these rely on the basis of a delicate compromise: hide it, but do not make it vanish.

2.2 Function of Veiling

Euphemism can also fulfill another purpose: the function of veiling. This function consists in disguising a segment of reality so that the euphemistic expression presents a fact in such a way that the hearer’s attention is guided to specific parts of the utterance or to opinions which are deliberately chosen by the speaker. Unlike concealing euphemisms, which take both speaker’s and hearer’s interests into consideration, given their shared respect for conventions, the veiling euphemisms are more oriented to the speaker and his intentions, which usually imply the effects he wants to trigger in the hearer. The latter is only aware of both the designatum and the speaker’s intentions if he is acquainted with the subject of discourse. In this sense, a greater factual knowledge corresponds to increasing euphemism awareness. Moreover, it is interesting to notice that the speaker’s manipulation of this discursive reception does not necessarily imply a loss of face, since the speaker does not actually lie. Veiling euphemisms can thus be a very subtle form of inaccuracy or of distorting the truth.

The language of the press provides us with plenty of examples of veiling euphemisms. One of the newspapers published a news story on 11th April 1999, quoting Tony Blair’s statement about the proceedings of the Kosovo war: “We are ready to use ground troops to ensure the safe return of the population to their homes in Kosovo”. This statement is not a lie, but it has a somewhat devious character in relation to the truth. In the foreground an argument emerges which is probably not the most central one to justify an

eventual war on the ground (this would be a second phase in the war, which had so far only consisted of NATO air strikes). To a less informed hearer this statement entails a valid motivation or justification for the war, and so he seeks no further disguised information, such as the absolute need to win the war, so that NATO's "allied force" is not put at stake. If this effect is achieved, the speaker's intention is accomplished and with it the veiling function of an expression which we can consider in this sense as euphemistic. As we have already noted, the two functions of euphemism are not mutually exclusive, but often occur simultaneously in a single word or phrase. Therefore, a precise separation is not always possible, and one has instead to count on overlapping and double functions.

3. REASONS FOR THE USE OF EUPHEMISM

The reasons that lead to the choice of a euphemism are hard to set apart from the intentions that underlie this option. In fact, the reasons for the use of euphemism go hand in hand with the functions it helps to achieve, which we have discussed in the Chapter Three.

3.1 Psychologically Based Reasons

The search for the reasons for euphemism concerns what is behind its use. This question is particularly relevant if one keeps in mind the decreasing reputation of the strategy. Kate Burridge (1991) states that despite public hankering for a kind of "no frills", "say-it-as-it-is" euphemism-free language, humankind would have to change beyond all recognition for the need for euphemism to ever disappear. There is, thus, a need for euphemism. The first evidence of this need is the list of taboo subjects that prevail in contemporary society. Even if they do not have much in common with the magical taboos of ancestral communities, these subjects are socially recognized as inconvenient and require special care in conversation or discourse. The individual speaker looks for a way of dealing with the discomfort they provoke, and euphemism emerges in this context as a means of dealing both with the subjects and with the emotions they cause. The first reason for euphemism is thus of a psychological or expressive nature, and goes back to the inherent negativity of certain items and of the words used to name them. However, this emotional label is not individual or subjective but rather results from a conventional social judgment. For this reason individually to taboo subjects, but when he is the speaker does not just react compelled to mention them in conversation or discourse, he takes his hearer into consideration as well. For this purpose he chooses a euphemism, a conventionally accepted means of mentioning an emotionally marked subject.

Intrinsically related to this psychological and emotional motivation for euphemism is the concern with face: "every time we open our mouths, we have to consider whether

what we say is likely to maintain, enhance, or damage our own face, as well Burridge, 1991 as considering the effect of our utterance on others" (Allan & Burridge, 1991, p.5). Communication is based upon a set of conventions, which are observed by both discourse partners if they want to orient their interaction towards a face-saving conversation or discourse. Therefore, if the speaker knows beforehand that the subject he is about to mention is likely to arouse a negative emotional response in the hearer, he will act according to their shared conventions and speak about this issue by means of a euphemistic circumlocution. Since conversation or discourse is normally oriented towards face-saving, the hearer will expect no less from the speaker than the deliberate use of this expression. This implicit agreement ensures the success of the speech act: not only does it allow the reference to the forbidden subject; it also guarantees the respect of both course partners for what they consensually agree on and accept as taboo. The concern with face and the particular role euphemism plays in its saving are quite evident in examples of conventional taboo, e.g. shame-based euphemisms (when the subject is sex or the human body), fear-based euphemism (as in the reference to disease or death) or in the courtesy required in the reference to others (for example, names for professional activities and social minorities).

Now, in the case of the official euphemism (specifically in press articles about war), this concern with face requires a different reading. Political speech, for example, is conditioned to a great extent by the image of the speaker, and vice versa. In order to maintain a good public image, the speaker shows great care in discourse, which is not concerned so much with the image of the anonymous mass hearer as it is with saving one's own face. With this goal in mind, the speaker will avoid mentioning subjects he knows might somehow threaten his public image. Therefore it is often the case that he chooses to use a euphemism as a softener for an unpleasant issue. By doing so, he shows respect for conventionally established taboos, and this will itself serve the same face-saving purpose.

Let us consider a different case, namely press reports about war. Here euphemism is often said to be inspired not by the respect for conventional taboos (e.g. death) but by security reasons, i.e. it is primarily used to defend a community or state from an eventual pernicious use that the opposition party might make of the facts the euphemism helps to conceal. These are frequent justifications for the use of euphemism, once its use is detected and the purpose behind it is not quite clear. Furthermore, the use of euphemism in the official public discourse of the press can be motivated by the need for a balance between the emotional impact of certain news subjects and the concern with rigorous objective information. The First distinction between quality press and popular press is made at this level. The latter is known for the choice of emotionally marked subjects and for an emotional processing of the information, in order

to stimulate an emotional response in the reader, whereas quality papers are more concerned with providing more factual, objective information and are thus more likely to use euphemisms for this purpose, instead of emotionally (negatively) marked direct designations. Let us illustrate this with an example. The frame of reference consists of news reports from two Portuguese and two German newspapers. In the reports published on 16 April 1999 about the war in Kosovo, all the papers have a common referent: the death of 75 civilians from Kosovo caused by a NATO bombing raid. The four papers reported this fact rather differently. While *Publico* mentioned a “mistake” (“erro”) and the *Frankfurter Rundschau* called it an “accident” (“Unfall”), the popular *Correio da Manhã* qualified it as a “tragic mistake” (“erro tragico”) and the *Bild-Zeitung* as a “blood bath” (“Blutbad”) (Enright, 1985).

All four designations call up different mental pictures of the same event. The popular papers clearly trigger a more emotional response than their quality equivalents. This example helps to see the emotional impact of a news subject according to the principles at work in its processing. The reasons for the use of euphemism mentioned so far are psychologically based, even if they overcome the strict individual sphere and work at a collective social level.

3.2 A Balance Between Efficiency and Expressivity in Communication

Beyond these reasons, we can find another reason for the use of euphemism, namely at the linguistic level: the need for a balance between efficiency and expressivity in communication. When the speaker performs a speech act, his main goal is to communicate in the most successful way with the least possible effort. In order to achieve this, he makes use of various strategies, which may be oriented either to his role in the discourse or to the hearer. Speaker-oriented strategies aim at making communication more efficient, by reducing the linguistic effort. This is the case of devices like analogy, metaphor and metonymy. Hearer-oriented strategies in turn seek to ensure a correct understanding by the hearer of what the speaker wishes to express. Therefore, speaker-oriented strategies aim at increasing communicative efficiency, while hearer-oriented strategies are more oriented towards expressivity in communication. Now, how can these two communicative principles provide a trigger the need for euphemism? As we have seen above, euphemism way of speaking about negatively marked subjects without the risk of being offensive, i.e. damaging the face. This implies that there is another possible way of evoking the same subject in discourse, namely by means of a direct designation. However, since the direct designation for a taboo generally gains the same forbidden nature as the subject itself, non-linguistic factors like this psychologically based evaluation create the need for a less harmful alternative. In other words, at first there

seems to be a contradiction about euphemism itself, if one considers the principle of efficiency: if there is a direct way to refer to a given subject, there seems to be no reason to replace it by an alternative one. Yet euphemism prevails because it is needed in discourse for the sake of expressivity, just like other ‘superfluous’ devices such as metonymy or redundancy. While these are usually the expressive responses to rhetorical demands, euphemism results from the emotionally based dissatisfaction with the direct designation.

CONCLUSION

Euphemism, as a phenomenon of language, is observed everywhere in all human societies and it is used in all human interactions. Using euphemism is an active pragmatic strategy of speakers in a certain time and a certain situation. It is predictable that euphemism will gain more publicity, legitimacy and respectability. As a matter of fact, euphemism is penetrating every corner of the world through the main channels, as do movies, music, books, magazines, radios and televisions. For example, “mental hospital” (euphemistically referring to a madhouse) and “dental plate” or “denture” (euphemistically referring to false teeth) are now popularized in our everyday conversations.

Since euphemism is so important in this world, we should better make a good analysis about it. At the beginning of this dissertation, the definitions are introduced and based on the related literature review; its basic functions are explored from the perspective of sociolinguistics. The analysis of euphemism from a sociolinguistic perspective reveals that euphemism, as a socio-cultural phenomenon, can be better explained by examining cultural and contextual factors that influence it. Language is influenced by culture and is a vehicle of culture. So does euphemism. The magic of euphemisms can only show itself when they are used in communication.

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