

A Tentative Study on the Functions and Applications of English Euphemism

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Abstract—English Euphemism is not only a social phenomenon, but also a lingual phenomenon. In social interaction, people have to use different words to convey their thoughts and ideas. In order to avoid the embarrassment or ease the sting of harsh words, man has created euphemism. In western cultures, people have been using euphemism widely in many different fields. The originality of this paper lies in the study of English euphemism from the perspective of pragmatics. This paper introduces the features, functions and the applications of English euphemism, intending to help people better understand euphemism and make good use of them in real communication.

Index Terms—English euphemism, feature, function, application

I. INTRODUCTION

In social interaction, people have to use different words to convey their thoughts and ideas. However, some of the words are unhappy, impolite and embarrassed if directly spoken, which often make the communication unpleasant. In order to avoid the embarrassment or ease the sting of harsh words, man has created euphemism. English euphemism is a lingual phenomenon existing in human society. It plays an important role in facilitating social interaction.

In etymology, the word euphemism is derived from a Greek word which means "to speak favorably". So the essence of euphemism lies in the use of inoffensive words or phrases instead of offensive or harsh ones. Euphemism has the function of politeness and beautification, which is helpful to develop benign communication. Accordingly, it's widely used in our daily communication to express something unpleasant.

The exact nature of the relationship between language and culture has fascinated, and continues to fascinate, people form a wide variety of backgrounds. That there should be some kind of relationship between the sounds, words, and syntax of a language and the ways in which speakers of that language experience the world and behave in it seems as obvious as to be truism. It would appear that the only problem is deciding the nature of the relationship and finding suitable ways to demonstrate it. Almost all cultures seem to have certain notions or unpleasant things that people try to avoid mentioning directly, even when there is such a term in a language. When such a notion or thing has to be referred to, the practice will be a substitute that sounds better. That's the coming of euphemisms. So we can see that euphemism have a strong relationship with our culture backgrounds, especially taboo words. The appearance of euphemism gives that better sound. That's the result of human development. If we want euphemism to help our communication in our daily life, we should know some of its basic knowledge.

A. Definition of Euphemism

The word "euphemism" is derived from a Greek word meaning "to speak favorably", or good speech. It is defined in Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English as the use of a pleasanter, less direct name for something thought to be unpleasant. The New Edition of the Oxford Concise Dictionary defines euphemism as substitution of mild or vague or roundabout expression for harsh or direct one; expression thus substituted. Although these definitions are a bit different, they all reflect one phenomenon, i.e. There are some things in our life that should not be stated bluntly or truthfully. And there are times when it is necessary, even wise, not to call a spade a spade, but to use some better-sounding names. (Feng, 1983)

So far, euphemism has different definitions in different books and there is not a universally accepted one. Here are some influential definitions:

In 1995, Concise Oxford Dictionary in 9th edition defines euphemism as a mild or vague expression substituted for one thought to be too harsh or direct.

In 1996, Pocket Oxford English-Chinese Dictionary gives the definition of euphemism as a mild or vague expression substituted for a harsher or more direct one.

In 1997, Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary lists a new definition: use of pleasant, mild or indirect words or phrases in place of more accurate or direct ones.

From these different definitions, there is something in common: euphemism is used to refer a mode of expression which is mild, vague and polite used to mean something unpleasant.

But why are people unwilling to say or express something explicitly? In fact, words themselves are meaningless with the sounds and forms. It is the accumulated associations with real objects and ideas the words provoke that give them

meaning. When a word is attached with psychologically unpleasant elements, people try to find a colored word to avert an unpleasant fact. Therefore, it is natural for euphemisms to come into being and be used to soften an offensive or unpleasant expression.

B. Introduction of English Euphemism

English euphemism is a lingual phenomenon existing in human society. It plays an important role in facilitating social interaction. Euphemism is an important rhetorical means in English. It is not only a cultural phenomenon, but also a social phenomenon. It just likes a mirror, which reflects some social and psychological phenomena. The pragmatic functions of English euphemism in its application scope can be used as evidence to show that euphemism is more of a communicative means than of a rhetorical device.

II. FEATURES OF EUPHEMISM

A. Euphemism in Our Daily Life.

Words of euphemism were and still are widely used in our daily life. In different cultures, things related to sex and sexual relationships are avoided. For example, fuck, have sexual intercourse etc. were usually replaced by "go to bed together", "have relation" etc. Old people are usually sensitive to old age and death. People would use "elderly" or "experience" to describe their physical condition.

B. Euphemism in Different Genders

Nowadays, with the development of the society, women's social and family status has been higher and higher. Words related to women's physical situation have been greatly avoided. Much euphemism was and is still used in our daily life. We often hear young ladies refer to their monthly period as "the old friend" or something like that. Of course we have to show respect to women both physically and linguistically. In many countries words related to women's physical condition are taboos. Even today we can never say a fat lady "being fat". Instead we use words like "overweight" or something like that. All this helped people to use euphemism in our daily life.

C. Euphemism from Different People of Social Status

Generally speaking, there were three classes of ordinary citizens among the population, namely, upper, middle and lower classes. Each class helped to use euphemism respectively. The upper -class didn't have to worry about the taboos in their daily life as they had the power both economically and psychologically because they were wealthy and they received good education. Those who belong to the lower class wanted to improve their social status. They were very cautious about the language they use in daily utterances for fear of offending the rich and powerful people. The middle -class people helped to develop and spread the euphemism in their daily lives. People never used the words like "death", "naked" etc. This phenomenon greatly promoted the use and spread of euphemism which in turn encouraged people to use euphemism.

D. Euphemism from Psychological Point of View in Ancient Times

Euphemism is the reflection of people's social psychology. It is closely related to the development of the society. In the ancient times when people were uncivilized, uneducated and primitive, they couldn't explain strange occurrences like earthquake, solar and lunar eclipse, death of people etc. Therefore people invented so called "elegant words" to replace words of obscene, vulgar and profane. For example, the most fearful word "death" was expressed in various sorts of ways like "pass away", "fall asleep", "go away" etc. also in the ancient times when astronomy was not very developed, people didn't know anything about solar and lunar eclipse. They referred to the lunar eclipse as "The dog has eaten the moon" as they were much frightened by it.

III. THE PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH EUPHEMISM

From the perspective of pragmatics, euphemism violates the cooperative principle, and meanwhile observes the politeness principle and the face theory, which makes euphemism an effective facilitating method in English teaching as affective factors have interrelationship with second language teaching and euphemism has involved human emotion. Euphemism is an important rhetorical means in English. It is not only a cultural phenomenon, but also a social phenomenon. It just likes a mirror, which reflects some social and psychological phenomena.

A. The Pragmatic Functions of English Euphemism

Euphemism in different cultures shares the same psychological and linguistic pattern as the basis of their formation. A word can be thought of as a reaction to stimulus. When a word has long been associated with the stimulus it causes, the word itself carries some characteristics of the stimulating subject. If some elements of the reaction are closely related with the word that describes them, people tend to substitute the word by a word, which does not have such negative associations.

Euphemism is commonly used in many aspects of daily and social life such as physiological phenomena of human body, political, economic, military affairs as well as other social problems. The pragmatic functions of English

euphemism in its application scope can be used as evidence to show that euphemism is more of a communicative means than of a rhetorical device.

Euphemism is formed in many ways. Semantically, they are generally built in the following five manners. Firstly, they can be created by borrowing from other languages linguistic forms, which have less negative associations, for example, the latin word *mistruation* for the vulgar indo-european word *piss*. Secondly, they can be coined by widening the lexical meaning, as social disease for syphilis. Thirdly, semantic shift contributes its share, as rear end for buttocks and to sleep with for to have sexual intercourse with. Fourthly, metaphorical transfer creates euphemisms by cherry for hymen and blossom for papule. The last, but not the least, is phonetic distortion, which creates euphemisms out of the existing words people do not venture to speak of, by abbreviation (as ladies for ladies room), apocopation (as vamp for vampire), initiating (as JC for Jesus Christ), back forming (as burgle for burglar), reduplication (as peepee for piss), and other means.

a. The Function of Being Polite

With the development of social economy, people spontaneously pursue the language civilization to show that they are civilized and cultivated. So when people have to refer to something unpleasant, they prefer to employ some mild, implicit and euphemistic expressions. In such cases, the practice of euphemism shows its politeness function. Here, the key point of politeness function is to respect others, to express something politely, so as to keep people from being hurt and make them accept those things pleasantly. In communication with others, euphemisms can help people form a positive communication atmosphere and establish harmonious social relationship and eventually obtain the communication goals.

"Old" is a very sensitive word to many people in the English speaking countries, because "old" gives people an impression that someone is useless to society. So usually, we use "senior citizens" or "superior citizens" to refer to the old people. And "feel one's age" is used to mean "get old". Besides, the word "poor" also has many euphemisms. During the last twenty years or so, several other words have been trying to take its place, at least among educated and in "officialese". As some unfortunate person put it: "At first I was poor, then I became needy, later I was underprivileged. Now I'm disadvantaged. I still don't have a cent to my name, but I sure have a great vocabulary". Among them, the words "poor, needy, underprivileged, disadvantaged" all have the same meaning in essence, but more euphemistic than the former one.

In education, euphemisms are likewise prolific. Some people prefer educator to teacher. Students are still students, but comments about them need to be carefully considered. Negative expressions have given way to more positive ones. The comment for a below average student might be that he/she is working at his/her own level, which doesn't hurt anyone's pride. Can do better work with help doesn't sound bad either; it's just a less offensive way of saying a student is slow or stupid. And if a student cheats in class, the teacher would rather say He depends on others to do his work.

b. The Function of Gloss-over

The emergence of euphemisms also has something to do with the language sensitivity. From about the time when people began to know beauty and ugliness, to distinguish between kindness and evil, they had already got some shame about sex, certain parts of their body, etc. And with the development of society, the range of the lexical sensitivity is spreading. This provides an open air for the gloss-over function of Euphemisms. Even in the modern world today, people may still feel somewhat shameful when speaking of the sexual acts. They would like to use "have physical contact with", "sleep with", "go to bed with" or "make love" to express the same meaning. And "free love" is called trial marriage; "illegitimate child" becomes love child. Besides, people rarely use the word "homosexual" instead, they like to replace it by "gay", "comrade", or "queer".

As for human body, people usually use the following words to refer to some sensitive parts, for instance, they like to substitute abdomen for belly, posterior for buttocks, chest/bosom for breasts, limb for leg. And as for the physical shortcomings, "physically handicapped" is usually substituted for "crippled". If someone is deaf, people would rather say "He is hard of hearing"; if blind, people would say "He is visually retarded".

Additionally, in recent years, more and more euphemisms are being used in talking about social life and social affairs. For example, euphemisms are used in referring to occupation either to conceal unpleasantness, or to improve social status. There are fewer occupations called jobs; many have become professions. A garbage collector is described as a sanitary engineer; a gardener is called a landscape architect; a barber is called a hair stylist or a hair ologist; and salesmen are beautified as customers' representatives. Besides, some professions that people despise also have many euphemisms. Prostitute is addressed as lady of the evening, business girl, harlot or streetwalker. And it is ironical that the prostitutes themselves call their occupation as business, or even as social service.

c. The Function of Avoiding Taboo

Some English euphemisms are associated with taboo. Taboo exists in every language. Euphemisms can be used as substitutes in order to avoid embarrassment, anxiety and public shame caused by taboo words. For example, "God" is replaced by "Gad", "Satan" by "the good man", and "die" by "pass away".

Taboo is one way in which a society expresses its disapproval of certain kinds of behavior believed to be harmful to its members, either for supernatural reasons or because such behavior is held to violate a moral code. Consequently, so far as language is concerned, certain things are not be said or certain objects can be referred to only in certain circumstances, for example, only by certain people, or through deliberate circumlocutions, i.e. euphemistically. Of

course, there are always those who are prepared to break the taboos in an attempt to show their own freedom from such restrictions or to express the taboos as irrational and unjustified, as in certain movements for 'free speech'.

In recent times, more and more euphemisms are being used in talking about social life and social affairs. The name of some professions can be very misleading; for example, landscape architect for gardener, beautician for hair dresser, building engineer for janitor, prison officer for gardener and funeral director for undertaker. In international relations, "dressed -up" expressions have become commonplace. Third world countries named backward countries, undeveloped -countries, developing countries, emerging nations and less developed countries. "Taboo and euphemism affect all of us. Each social group is different from every other in how it constrains linguistic behavior in this way, but constrains in the same such way it certainly does." (Ronald, 1986, p.231)

d. The Function of Disguising

Euphemism can be used to beautify things to avoid negative impact and it is not always used out of good motives. By using euphemism, ambiguity can be produced and truth can be hidden. As a consequence, some profiteers and politicians are likely to use euphemism to make it a language of deceit. For example, in 1983, American arms invaded Grenada. The American President Reagan fit to be tied because news reporters used the words "invade" very much in reporting the news. On the other hand, Reagan called it "rescue mission".

Since euphemisms often express something in an implicit and roundabout way, sometimes this may cause ambiguity and people may feel confused about them. So, politicians, statesmen and businessmen always make full use of this feature to mask the reality, exonerate their guilt and raise high the quality of their goods, thus making euphemisms have the disguise function. The primary feature of euphemism here is to numb the public without telling a downright lie yet to get an almost equally desirable response. Therefore, "industrial climate" means "dispute between employer and employee". And an economic crisis is another subject for euphemism. The prewar word "slump" was soon replaced by "depression", then by the word "recession". Now "recession" is replaced by "downturn". Besides, war is a fertile time for language. Governments need euphemisms to persuade people to put up with the sufferings of war. Therefore, attack is active defense; the aggressive action is preemptive action; surprise attacks against enemies are now termed preemptive strikes. To retreat is to retire to prepared positions or to break off contact with enemy. To take out a city is to blast it to destruction.

B. Euphemism and Harmonious Principle

Harmony is a maxim in communication. Tactfully expressing ideas can decrease unpleasure. So, the purpose of communication should be close. If the addressee is pleased with the addresser's words, the conversation comes to harmonious level. Approach Maxim is a maxim of Harmonious Principle. It means addresser and addressees regulate acts on purpose and harmonize communication to decrease the original difference of both sides. One is that the verbal style of the addresser and addressee has the tendency of approaching, the other is the speech-act of addresser and addressee harmoniously matched and connected.

Euphemism strengthens the acceptable agreement of verbal acceptable in a euphemistic way. For example, the nurse injects the patient. She failed the first time, and she had to inject again. She said, "I'm sorry, I did not inject well, making you suffer a lot, would you please cooperate again?" Generally speaking, the patient will cooperate with the nurse. But if the nurse said, "Your arm is so fat that I can't find the pulse." The patient may get angry with the nurse, and their conversation will not get to harmony. But in the first conversation, the nurse owes the failure to herself, and she uses the euphemism "Would you please..." which makes the effect of conversation quite different from the first one.

There is another example; a customer went into a clothes shop. She wanted to buy a blouse. She has tried several blouses, but they were not fit. Then the shop assistant said, "You are plump, would you like this full size one?" Then the customer responded, "I would like to have a try. Thank you."

In this conversation, the shop assistant used "full size", to show the woman should wear the biggest one. She regulated her words and made them more acceptable. If she said, you are fat enough; the biggest one fits you well. Probably, the customer will be angry. In this case, the approach maxim is flouted. Either addresser or addressee feels unhappy. But euphemism approaches the aim of communication effectively. It shortens the distance between addresser and addressee. It makes the style and the act of addresser and addressee closer.

IV. APPLICATION OF EUPHEMISM IN ENGLISH TEACHING

From the above brief pragmatic analysis of euphemism, we can see that euphemism can be a useful method to facilitate English teaching. Therefore, teachers should choose proper euphemisms in order to achieve specific teaching objectives smoothly.

Here are some typical teaching contexts with euphemistic examples so as to give a light on successful application of euphemism in English teaching.

1. Raising questions. The euphemistic way of raising questions can motivate students as it may help the students feel relaxed in the classroom. Particularly, such euphemistic way can encourage more voluntary students to answer questions, which could result in better performance. The euphemistic expressing for raising questions in class can go as following: "Could you please have a try?" "Could you share us with your own idea?" Such utterances can turn out to be useful, especially in the case of shy and timid students, as it has shortened the distance between the teacher and the

student and helps remove the fear of speaking in public.

2. Correcting errors. Making mistakes is unavoidable in learning, and can be a stimulator to progress. However, mostly language learners are afraid of errors, viewing them as threat to ego. Actually, mistake correction can help students to have a better understanding of language items' meaning and usage. However, teachers have to be careful when correcting since if it is done in a direct way, both students' feelings and self-confidence will be hurt. The teacher should think over specific wording to individual students in various situations. Euphemisms can help teachers solve the problem, for it can not only clarify the mistake, but also maintain the student's self-esteem. For example: Maybe you'd better think it over again.

3. Making comments. There are many occasions for teachers to make comments on students. The wording teachers employ can have impact on students' feelings. A good language teacher is supposed to be tactful in making comments, preferring mild and positive words to harsh and negative ones as so to stimulate students' positive emotional factors. By using the following pleasant and mild sentences with underlying meanings, students are clear about their weakness and are encouraged to work harder with confidence. For instance: You have tried the best, and I am sure you can do it better next time.

V. CONCLUSION

Euphemism is a common linguistic phenomenon, which is closely related to culture backgrounds, religious thoughts, life styles, etc. A short introduction to euphemism in English and Chinese will benefit our future intercultural communication. Lots of scholars had studied euphemism from various ways. Such as linguistic, social-linguistic, rhetoric view, pragmatics and so on. From all those studies, we can easily found out that the development of euphemism have a stong relationship with the development of taboo words more or less. In this paper, the author elaborates this topic from their relationship. At the very beginning, a semantic definition and classification were given. a basic knowledge of comparison about taboo words in English and Chinese gave us a basic meaning of the existence of euphemism. Euphemisms are the substance of taboo words. From the relationship of taboos and euphemisms illustrates the national characters in English and Chinese euphemisms. There are religious characters in English euphemisms and class characters in Chinese euphemisms. We know that the communication between us should under the principle of cooperation. But the differences between different culture background, age, sex, status and positions always make the principle out of effect. So euphemism can do a lot to maintain people's social status in our today's society, especially in intercultural communication. A preoccupation about euphemism can avoid some embarrassments in intercultural communication. If we want success in our future profession, a clear knowledge of euphemism is necessary.

Euphemisms have been widely used in our daily life. Without it, no one could achieve better communication. To sum up, euphemism has close connection with pragmatics. It affects our daily communication and makes our daily conversation go harmoniously. The functions of euphemism are obvious, which cannot be substituted by other linguistic way. Euphemism saves face and reaches harmony. Anyway, it is a symbol of civilization. So the research on it is necessary.

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