

# An Analysis of Phonetic Formation in English Euphemism

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**Abstract**—In daily life, people often use euphemistic terms or expressions to replace those unpleasant, rude, and offensive things or taboo subjects, to make them sound more considerate and implicit. With the rapid development of science and the progress of human civilization, euphemism, as one of the most important components in English language, is a lubricant in linguistic communication and has the tendency of multiplying. This paper discusses the phonetic formation of English euphemism as well as its characteristics and significances. The detailed analysis of phonetic formation of euphemism can help people use euphemism more flexibly in daily life and promote the efficiency and quality of communication.

**Index Terms**—English euphemism, phonetic formation, significances

## I. INTRODUCTION

Languages play different roles in different social communications and bear their unique features on different levels of languages (Feng Dongli, 2015). As a tool of communication, language is transferred by pronunciation. Speakers are supposed to use correct pronunciation during interactive communication. The interpersonal function reflects the social relationship between the speakers and listeners concerned with the situation, or it reflects the relationship of the roles played by speakers and listeners in the communicative process (Huang Ying, 2009).

Euphemism, as both a linguistic and a social phenomenon, plays the role of lubricant in communication, avoiding the embarrassment of the listener caused by the straightforwardness of the speaker. Nobody can refuse the use of euphemism, which exists in almost every known language, every speech community, or every social class, for almost all cultures seem to have certain notions or things that people try to avoid mentioning directly (Shu Dingfang, 2008). People are supposed to use euphemism to show politeness when talking with others.

Actually, every type of English euphemism has to change part of the original pronunciation, whether it is common euphemism or typical phonetic formation euphemism. The common euphemistic descriptions always have something to do with lexical replacement. Therefore, the phonetic characteristics of the descriptions would change. For typical phonetic euphemism, it is more obvious and more understandable in phonetic changing.

Phonetic euphemism has great relationship with interactive communication, because people use language to transmit what they want to say. Therefore, the use of phonetic euphemism is pervasive in people's daily life.

## II. EUPHEMISM

With the development of the society, euphemism has already permeated into almost every field of people's daily life. In order to know more about English euphemism, it is necessary to know the definitions, and functions of English euphemism.

### A. Definitions of English Euphemism

Euphemism comes from the Greek word εὐφημία. The prefix "Eu" means "good", and the stem "phemism" means speech. So the literal meaning of "Euphemism" is "word of good omen" or "good speech". Generally speaking, euphemism is a way to use indirect words or phrases to replace direct ones to make the words or phrases more acceptable (Chen Jiayu, Li Wenwen, 2012).

Neaman defines "euphemism" as "substituting an inoffensive or pleasant term for a more explicit, offensive one, thereby veneering the truth by using kind words." (Lu Xiaoji, 2011)

Longman Contemporary Advanced Dictionary (the 2004 edition) gives a definition to euphemism as "a polite word or expression that you use instead of a more direct one to avoid shocking or upsetting someone." (Lu Xiaoji, 2011)

Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary (the 7th edition) defines "euphemism" as "an indirect word or phrase that people often use to refer to something embarrassing or unpleasant, sometimes to make it more acceptable than it really is".

All of the four definitions are from the pragmatic category of euphemism, which caters to the function of the polite expression of euphemism. However, the definitions don't concern themselves with the formation methods of euphemism.

In short, when a word or phrase is used as a euphemism, it becomes a metaphor whose literal meaning is often hidden

or dropped. Euphemisms are also used to hide unpleasant ideas even when the literal term for them is not necessarily offensive (Jiang Liping, 2013).

### B. *Functions of English Euphemism*

Euphemism is a reflection of social psychology (Howard F. Stein, 1998). A number of direct expressions would make people feel embarrassed, unhappy, or even frightened in communication. The euphemistic expressions would enable people to circumvent some unpleasantness and embarrassment in daily life. The use of phonetic euphemism is essential in interactive communication. There are four main functions of phonetic euphemism:

First is taboo avoidance. This is the main psychological origin of euphemism. The original purpose of euphemism is the avoidance of offensive and unpleasant things that ancient people did not want to mention. When ancient people were trying to evade or avoid mentioning those taboos, they had to find substitutions, and euphemism was the optimum option. Taboo avoidance is an important function of euphemism. For example, death is a taboo for human beings, and the ancients used “go to heaven” to allude to it.

Secondly, it is a courteous expression. During interactive communication, speakers can show their politeness by using diplomatic euphemisms (Wang Xiaoyan, 2014). Because of the polite principle, speakers should avoid referring to not only taboos but also matters that may offend the listener, for example, the listener’s private matters. Thus, people use “recycler” to replace “junkman”, “footwear maintenance engineer” to replace “people who are washing shoes as a career”, “hair beautician” refers to “barber” and so on. Therefore people who are socially inferior would feel they are respected by their society, and the atmosphere of the communication would be polite and harmonious.

The third one is the concealment of truth, which is typically used in politics and media broadcasting. The politicians and broadcasters always use euphemism to cover and conceal the harsh truth so as not to bring in wrath and panic. For instance, American politicians used “air support” instead of “bombing”, and “civilian casualties” instead of “collateral damage” during the Vietnam War to protect the reputation of the American government. Also in media broadcasting, reporters often use “recession” or “depression” to replace “economic crisis”, and “the increasing of tax” to replace “revenue enhancements”. So the civilian audience can hardly get the true information from the media when it comes to some sensitive matters or destructive items.

The last function is humor. The euphemistic expressions of some taboos and rough things not only conform to the polite principle but also can bring about the humorous effect. For example, nowadays, people use “the battle of the bulge” to describe women who try hard to lose weight. Actually, the phrase “the battle of the bulge” comes from the WWII. The original use of the phrase was to describe the last war launched by the German Army in 1949. It is very humorous to use such a serious phrase to describe those women who lose weight to be slim especially those who hardly win. With the same purpose, the use of “in one’s birthday suit” or “in Adam’s and Eve’s togs” to describe naked ones is also very humorous (Wang Jiayi, 2003).

### C. *Formations of English Euphemism*

The formation methods of euphemism are also quite important in euphemism learning. There are five main formation methods of euphemism: lexical formation, grammatical formation, slang, rhetorical formation, and phonetic formation. (Table 1)

Firstly, the lexical formation methods of euphemism mainly include borrowing, antonyms and the use of fuzzy words. For instance, the use of French word “abattoir” to replace “slaughter house” in English, “unwise” to replace “stupid”, and “growth” to refer to “tumor”.

Secondly, the grammatical formation of English euphemism includes five detailed methods: using past tense, “I wondered if you could give me a hand?”; using subjunctive mood, “we would rather you went there.”; using tag questions, “Lift the box for me, will you?”; using passive words as well as using negative sentences.

Thirdly, using slang to transmit the similar meaning. For instance, “screwed up” is a euphemism for “fucked up”, or “laid” for sexual intercourse. There is some disagreement over whether certain terms are or are not euphemisms. For example, sometimes the phrase “visually impaired” is labeled as a politically correct euphemism for blind. However, “visual impairment” can be a broader term, including, for example, people who have partial sight in one eye, or even those who wear glasses, a group that would be excluded by the word “blind”.

Fourthly, there are three main rhetorical ways to form euphemism, in other words, by using figures of speech including the use of metaphor, for example, someone who has died is said to “have passed on, checked out, cashed in their chips, kicked the bucket, keeled over, bit the dust, popped their clogs, pegged it, carked it, was snuffed out, turned their toes up, hopped the twig, bought the farm, got zapped, written their epitaph, fallen off their perch, croaked, given up the ghost, gone south, gone west, gone to California”(Zhou Lina, 2015); using substitution, people use “the big house” to refer to “prison”; and using analogy, “house maker” or “household” to refer to “house wife”.

The phonetic formation is an important method to form euphemism, which changes the original pronunciation of some offensive expressions and taboos to be elegant and polite. When it comes to the phonetic formation of euphemism, there is more than one particular formation.

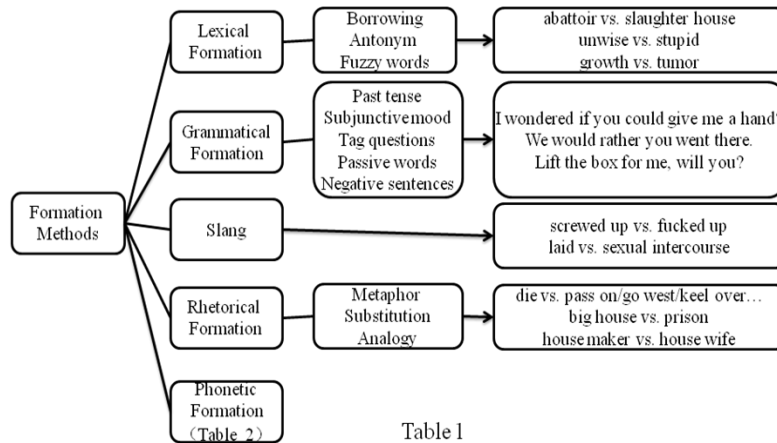


Table 1

### III. PHONETIC FORMATION OF ENGLISH EUPHEMISM

Phonetics is a branch of linguistics that comprises the study of the sounds of human speech. It is concerned with the physical properties of speech sounds or signs, their physiological production, acoustic properties, auditory perception, and neurophysiologic status. Phonology, on the other hand, is concerned with the abstract, grammatical characterization of systems of sounds or signs (Naghme Mirzaie Hosseinzadeh, 2015). The field of phonetics is a multilayered subject of linguistics that focuses on speech. In the case of oral languages, there are three basic areas of study: (O'Grady, 2005) Articulatory phonetics: the study of the production of speech sounds by the articulatory and vocal tract by the speaker; Acoustic phonetics: the study of the physical transmission of speech sounds from the speaker to the listener; Auditory phonetics: the study of the reception and perception of speech sounds by the listener.

The phonetic formation of euphemism is to change the original speech sounds of words, phrases, or some other language forms to make the expressions more mild, proper, and polite (Yang Xinzhang, 2005). The phonetic formation of English euphemism can be achieved in the following ways (table 2):

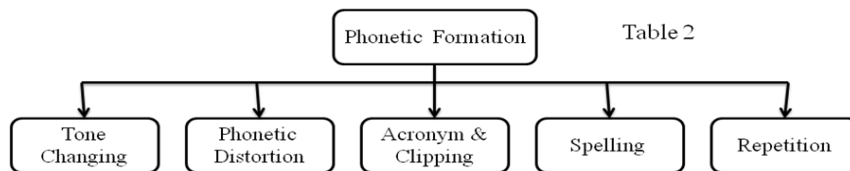


Table 2

#### A. Tone-changing

In English, the changing of intonation can form euphemism. For example, the fall-rise tone or low tone will give the hearer more space and freedom. For example, if someone uses the falling tone to say the following sentence, “open the door(↘),” it would give an impression of commanding, ordering, and the hearer would feel that he is not respected. However, if the same sentence, the speaker utter it in a fall-rise tone, “open (↘)the door(↗)”, it would give an impression that the speaker is asking for the opinion of the hearer. The implied meaning of this sentence is “would you mind opening the door?” The hearer would be willing to open the door. At the same time, if the speaker uses a very quick and high tone to say “open the door”, the hearer would also think that the speaker is giving an order, so it may offend the hearer. If the speaker uses a gentle and low tone instead, it would make the hearer more pleasant to hear.

When one is using tag question during interactive communication, he can use both rising tone and falling tone. However, different tones can change the meanings of the same utterance. The falling tone shows that the speaker has already known the answer of the question or the speaker expects to get the answer he wanted. The rising tone would give the hearer more space to think and decide, so it is more polite and mild. For example, if someone says “You will come with me, won’t you? (↘)” It has the implicated meaning of “you have to come with me,” or “I know that you will come with me.” Whereas, if the speaker uses the rising tone “You will come with me, won’t you?(↗)” it would give the hearer chance to think whether he will come or not. It is more polite and the hearer would feel he is expected and respected.

That is to say, the tone-changing not only includes the changing of tone such as rising tone and falling tone but also the different intonations of expressions. In a word, gentle voice and rising tone would make the hearer feel more comfortable and respected.

#### B. Phonetic Distortion

The phonetic distortion is to distort some syllables or stress in some words or to find a word with similar pronunciation to replace the original offensive one, thus, the use of new description can avoid taboos and some religious

beliefs as well as some embarrassing things (Kenneth L. Pike, Charles C. Fries, 2011). For example, the westerners believe in god, so things about god are often avoided directly. They distorted “God [gɒd] to “Gad [gæd]”, “Gosh [gɒʃ]” “Goodness [ˈgʊdnɪs]” “Golly [ˈgɒli]”, “cripes [kraɪps]” to replace “Christ [kraɪst]”, “damn [dɑːn]” “dash [dæʃ]” to replace “damn [dæm]”. Westerners prefer saying “my goodness” “my gosh” “gad darn you” to saying “my god” “god damn you”.

What’s more, the distortion of stress also can form euphemism, a typical example is the pronunciation of “laboratory”, the original phonetic symbol of this word was [ˈlæb(ə)rət(ə)rɪ], it is similar to the phonetic symbol of “lavatory [ˈlævət(ə)rɪ]” which means toilet. In order to distinguish the two sounds and avoid embarrassment, people change the stress of laboratory to [ləˈbɒrət(ə)rɪ].

Actually, phonetic distortion is an efficient way to form English euphemism; almost all the improper descriptions can be changed to be more euphemistic. When it comes to certain occasions, the speaker just needs to distort part of the pronunciation to make it sounds better. Phonetic distortion is not as fixed as others, and it can be created by people according to the need of situational context.

### C. Acronym and Clipping

An acronym word in euphemism is formed from the first letters of the words that make up the name of some taboos and something that are rude or offensive, and clipping is to cut out part of some taboos and embarrassing words to be a new description. Both methods can form euphemism and lead to phonetic change, this kind of phonetic change belongs to phonetic ellipsis.

Firstly, acronym is often used in taboo words or diseases as well as things that people don’t want to mention (Hayes School, 2013). For instance, “T.B” is for “tuberculosis”, “M.D” is for “mental deficiency”, “B.M” is for “bowel movement”, “the big C” is for “cancer”, “A.D” is for “drug addict”, “J.C” is for “Jesus Christ” “B-girl” is for “bar girl”, “J.D” is for “juvenile delinquent”, and “W.C” is for “water closet”. The use of acronym is concise and euphemistic to express things that would be rude when described directly. Just imagine the situation, if one day you met one of your acquaintances who forgot to check his zipper, would you choose to say “you forgot to examine your zipper” or “you forgot to Z.”? I believe most people would choose the second one to avoid causing embarrassment to you both, with the exception of those attempting to cause deliberate embarrassment.

Secondly, clipping is often used when the original descriptions are quite long and inelegant if mentioned in public directly. Here, the use of clipped words can not only convey the meaning but it is also more euphemistic than the original description. For instance, speakers prefer to say “bra” than “brassiere” when they have to mention it. Also, if one talks about a sexual pervert directly in conversation, the hearer would feel uncomfortable and frightened while the problem would be settled if we clip it to “vert”. There are many other similar descriptions in English, such as “cow” for “cow dung”, “ladies” for “ladies’ room”, “gents” for “gentlemen’s room”, “homo” for “homosexual” and so on.

All in all, both acronym and clipping can avoid the impression of roughness and impoliteness when it comes to some expressions which are improper to mention directly. Although the acronym and clipping descriptions are not so formal, they are more concise and casual.

### D. Spelling

Sometimes it is hard for a speaker to avoid saying some offensive or improper things during interactive communication. However, spelling can make it possible to be more euphemistic and polite. For example:

A: He is not smart, I think.

B: Well, S-T-U-P-I-D, actually.

If B says “stupid” directly, it not only would hurt the person who is referred to in the conversation, but also show the impoliteness of the speaker. Thus, spelling the word “stupid” not only transmits the information the speaker wants to say, but gives others an impression of humor and politeness.

What’s more, when it refers to some rude expressions, people can choose to spell them to avoid embarrassment and impoliteness, such as “f-u-c-k” to replace “fuck”, “d-a-m-n” to replace “damn”, “s-h-i-t” instead of “shit”.

Spelling is somehow similar to phonetic distortion, because both are very flexible (Harry Johnston, 2013). That is to say, the speaker can create new description to be more euphemistic in different situations. For example, different people may use different euphemistic ways to describe “damn”, some use “darn”; some may choose “D-A-M-N”. However, spelling is easier than phonetic distortion since the speaker hasn’t to think too much and just spell the expression. Spelling is often used to replace words that are not too complicated but offensive if stated directly.

### E. Repetition

Repetition is often used when the speaker refers to something about secretions and excretions. Obviously it is rough to mention these things directly especially for adults. Thus, on these occasions, a more euphemistic way is to talk about them like children do, because little children always repeat part of the pronunciation of those words and it is more euphemistic than describe them directly. For instance, they use “pee-pee” “wee-wee” or “sis-sis” refer to “urinate”, “poo-poo” or “doo-doo” refer to “defecate”. Nowadays, more and more adults are using these expressions to avoid embarrassment.

Repetition has many more limitations than other formation methods of phonetic euphemism, because not every rough

expression can become more euphemistic in a childish way (Peter Ladefoged, 2003). This way is often used when communicating with young children. Otherwise, it would not be more euphemistic but bring other embarrassment. For example, if an adult says to his friends, "I have to go poo-poo." Others would think the man is abnormal. So, it is important to choose the right method when forming euphemism, because the wrong ways would not only fail to avoid embarrassment but bring other troubles.

Actually, the phonetic formation methods are very flexible. The speakers can form euphemistic expressions by themselves when facing some improper expressions through tone-changing, phonetic distortion, acronym and clipping, spelling and repetition. Compared with euphemism used in literature books, phonetic euphemism is more available and useful in daily life. In the civilized society, phonetic euphemism plays an important role as lubricant.

#### IV. THE CHARACTERISTICS AND SIGNIFICANCES OF PHONETIC EUPHEMISM

It is clear that English euphemism can be achieved through changes in phonetics. How about the characteristics and significances of phonetic formation of English euphemism?

##### A. *Conforming to the Speaker Himself*

The psychology of the speakers is very important during interactive communication. As the initiator of the conversation, the speaker is always saying something to conform to the listener. At the same time, he tries to reach an agreement between himself and the listener. In this way, the speaker can carry on the conversation successfully. In other words, the interactive communication is the communication of psychology.

It is well known that interactive communication affects the speaker in many aspects. For example, rough, jarring and some direct expressions would not only bring a sense of nervousness to the speaker, but also hurt the affection of the listener. If one speaker talks in a rough or jarring way, he may often be refused by others, which would undoubtedly hurt his self-esteem. One of the important characteristics of human beings is getting along with the rest of society. Self-esteem is very important for a human being. Thus, in daily life, people try to do many things to protect their self-esteem.

Phonetic euphemism would protect the self-esteem of human beings in an efficient way. In order to conform to social niceties, people have to use euphemism during interactive communication to protect the self-esteem of others. For example, during an interactive communication, if the status of the speaker is lower than the listeners, he would try his best to use some elegant and euphemistic expressions to avoid being looked down upon or being found faults by others.

##### B. *Conforming to the Society*

According to the origin of euphemism, it has a huge correlation to society. Ancient people couldn't resist natural disasters and man-made calamities as well as disease and death, so they refused to mention them. However, they had to refer to those things although they didn't want to. Therefore they used other more euphemistic words to replace those things. That is to say, the origin of euphemism has a direct connection with the society. And the use of euphemism also conforms to the polite rules of the society. Speakers are supposed to be polite in their society especially during interactive communication. However, people can't avoid mentioning something that doesn't obey polite rules. When it comes to those occasions in which the speakers have to talk about some impolite things, phonetic euphemism plays an important role. People can use some more euphemistic expressions to replace those rough and embarrassing things. Thus, the use of euphemism conforms to the necessity of the society well.

##### C. *Conforming to Interactive Communication*

The intentions of interactive communication are very important. On some occasions, euphemism can help others accept the ideas of the speakers in a more comfortable way. At least, euphemism can help to give the listener an impression of politeness and make them willing to listen to more of the speakers' ideas. This is essential, because interactive communication normally accompanies some other intentions, such as making friends, getting the support from others, introducing something to others and so on. People are always trying to build good relationship with others through interactive communication. What's more, language is the most efficient method to achieve the intention. Thus, the speakers should try to find the most proper language to express what they are intending to convey.

Euphemism would make interactive communication more efficient as well as successful. The use of euphemism caters to not only the politeness necessity of interactive communication but also the necessity of humor and elegance.

##### D. *The Significance of Using Euphemism*

Euphemism is a common figure of speech in English, and it exists in every aspect of people's daily life. It is not only used to replace those rough and vulgar taboos, but also used in some other occasions to beautify the speech so as to be more and more proper. The famous American linguist Enright once said that nobody in society can refuse the fascination of euphemism. Euphemism always keeps the characteristics of being euphemistic, being pleasant to listeners as well as to the speakers themselves, and it gives others an impression of comfort, elegance, innovation and politeness. What's more, euphemism is continuing to develop and innovate to cater to modern society. Whatever society develops, euphemism will always follow the needs of the populace.

Also, the purpose of euphemism has changed from taboo avoidance and polite expression to multiple functions such

as humor and concealment. English euphemism has already permeated every aspect of daily life. The formation of euphemism has also developed to keep up with the society, for example, some new expressions on the Internet. The definition of euphemism has also broadened with the development of the society. Nowadays, euphemism has included almost all the implicated expressions that conform to the occasions.

As euphemism is continuing to develop to be more useful and proper to extensive situations, human beings have more opportunities to use it. Because the society is changing to be a more civilized one, there must be more improper expressions that should be replaced by more euphemistic ones. Thus, euphemism is sure to be more and more popular, which is not only the symbol of politeness, respectfulness and attainment of the speaker, but also the inevitable trend of the society.

## V. CONCLUSION

Phonetic euphemism as a communicative tool is applied everywhere in all human societies and used in all human interactions. The phonetic euphemism is efficient and useful when it comes to those considered unpleasant, rude, or offensive. In fact, no matter what kind of euphemism, when it is uttered by speakers, it has some relation to phonetic changing.

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