

Euphemism from Sociolinguistics Perspective

Ruiying Shi^{1,a,*}

¹Foreign Language School, Shandong First Medical University (Shandong Academy of Medical Sciences), Tai'an, 271016, China

a. shiruiy09@outlook.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: Euphemism is an important means of harmonizing interpersonal relations in language use. As a universal phenomenon in human language, in different cultural backgrounds and different language groups, different social classes have certain linguistic means to express euphemisms, so the research on euphemisms is very rich. Linguistics at home and abroad have conducted a lot of research on the origin, history, development and change of euphemisms from the perspectives of sociolinguistics, rhetoric, psychology and pragmatics. Since euphemisms are used in many fields of social life, they have had strong sociocultural characteristics since their birth. Therefore, this paper mainly analyses the pragmatic functions of euphemisms and the differences in their use in communicative contexts from the perspective of sociolinguistics. In this paper, the author uses the context theory and the comparative analysis theory of sociolinguistics to analyse euphemisms. The findings of this paper have a positive effect on cross-cultural communication and elimination of communicative errors.

Keywords: euphemism, sociolinguistics, communicative function, cultural

1. Introduction

Euphemisms are an appropriate way of expression that people wish to find in their socializing and communication, which allows both parties to communicate smoothly, but also allows both parties to perceive the exchange as friendly and enjoyable. This shows that the use of euphemisms plays an important role in the daily life of human beings. People use euphemisms when they want to talk about something offensive or sensitive and unpleasant, but at the same time they want to be polite. This is also to make a better impression on others, as society is becoming more and more conscious of human rights and privacy, and to avoid offending others when communicating with them. Enright stated “A language without euphemisms would be a defective instrument of communication” [1]. Since the 1960s and 1970s, sociolinguistics has become a recognized research perspective on language and language use both nationally and internationally. Peter Trudgill states that “language is very much a social phenomenon”, and “a study of language totally without reference to its social context inevitably leads to the omission of some of the more complex and interesting aspects of language and to the loss of opportunities for further theoretical progress” [2]. As can be seen from the scholars' viewpoints, understanding euphemisms only from a linguistic perspective is incomplete, and any successful study of linguistic phenomena cannot be separated from the social context in which they are embedded.

Therefore, this paper argues that the sociolinguistic theories of context and culture are indispensable to the study of euphemisms.

2. Overview of Euphemisms

Euphemism originates from Greek, that is, “the substitution of a mild or indirect word or phrase for a blunter or harsher one,” referring to the substitution of direct and vulgar words with subtle words. Some scholars in China study it as a kind of rhetoric. Chen Wangdao divides euphemisms into two categories, one of which refers to the use of subtle words to underline or imply when people speak. The other category refers to the words used to avoid, cover up or embellish certain things or situations when speaking [3].

2.1. The Social Basis of Euphemisms

2.1.1. The Cultural Foundation of Society

Language is the carrier of society and culture, it is inextricably linked to culture, interdependent and mutually influential. The linguist Sapir said, “Language needs an environment and can not exist without culture or separate from the tradition and belief society inherits.” [4]. English euphemisms are inextricably linked to the culture of Anglo-American countries and are an important reference to the customs of each country. The creation of euphemisms was initially related to religious beliefs and taboos in religion. Subsequently, when European and American societies entered a period of peaceful development, people paid attention to etiquette, which promoted the creation of euphemisms.

2.1.2. The Psychological Basis of Society

In addition, euphemisms reflect the other side of social phenomena and are a mirror of social psychology. In real life, not everything can be expressed directly without any modification. It is because there are some things that stating outright will cause unpleasant or embarrassing emotions, and at the same time, it is not polite. In order to use indirect expressions that are more psychologically acceptable to people, euphemisms have proliferated. For example, “plump” is used instead of “fat”, and “cancer” is replaced by “long illness”, “pass away” instead of “die”. This psychological basis has made the language used in people’s interactions increasingly soft and more acceptable, reflecting the progress and civilization of society.

2.2. The Diachronic Characteristics of Euphemism

English euphemism is a social phenomenon, and its development in all its aspects is inevitably influenced by society. And society changes with time, which means that in order to understand the process of change of euphemisms, it is necessary to study its characteristics over time, and people will find that English euphemisms are different in different historical periods. The most representative example is the different attitudes towards “sex” at different times, such as the evolution of a series of euphemisms for “pregnancy” [5]:

- She has cancelled all her social engagements. (1856)
- She is in an interesting condition. (1880)
- She is in a delicate condition. (1895)
- She is knitting little booties. (1910)
- She is in a family way. (1920)
- She is expecting. (1935)
- She is pregnant. (1956)

3. The Social Pragmatic Function of Euphemism

In a social state, people use euphemisms for two main purposes. Firstly, out of goodwill and respect, euphemisms are used to reduce the discomfort or embarrassment that may be caused. Secondly, out of a self-excusing, self-compassionate desire, they use euphemisms to cover up, to cope with the situation, to meet the vanity or seek improper interests [6].

3.1. Taboo Function

The most direct function of euphemisms is to be used to avoid certain taboos and to avoid unpleasant scenarios resulting from direct expression. The avoidance function is also the first pragmatic function of euphemism. The emergence of euphemism avoidance function is related to language taboos. Linguistic taboos originate from people's misconceptions about the relationship between language and objective things [7]. To this day, people's intimate parts are also taboo, such as "backsides" for buttocks and "lower parts" for male or female genitals. Death is often taboo, and as mentioned earlier, people rarely use the word "death" directly, but rather "go to heaven" and "pass away" instead.

3.2. Politeness Function

In today's civilized era, people are increasingly valuing the importance of politeness in their interactions and it is considered an integral part of social morality. If language is used inappropriately in the course of interpersonal communication, it will seem impolite and hurt the feelings of others. For example, when a person is not good-looking, one often uses "plain-looking" instead of "ugly". When describing someone's profession, in order to dilute the inferiority complex of these people, it is common to use "Communication-monitor" instead of "operator", "Funeral service director" instead of "undertaker", "busboy" called "sanitarian", etc. These expressions fulfil the principle of equality in interpersonal relations and, at the same time, reflect the principle of politeness.

3.3. Masking Function

Another reason why people use euphemisms in communication is that it has an ambiguous colour, which makes euphemisms have a specific masking function. People use euphemisms to cover up some things they don't want to mention directly and to reduce the irritation of the language, which is the masking function of euphemisms [8]. Euphemisms are used to the fullest extent in Western politics. In order to cover up social problems such as poverty and crime, the poor are called "the underprivileged" or "the low-income class", and slums are called "substandard housing". In addition, many euphemisms are used to cover up wars of aggression and political scandals. For example, "international armed conflict" is used instead of "war of aggression", "pre-emptive action" is used instead of "aggression", and the term "wiretapping" disguised as "intelligence gathering".

4. Differences in the Use of Euphemisms in Communicative Contexts

The use of euphemisms in communicative contexts has different characteristics based on different elements. Of particular importance is the situation of the participants in the communication, including gender, social status, education level and so on. In addition, the use of euphemisms varies according to the communicative context.

4.1. Communicative Participant

4.1.1. Sex

People use euphemisms more often when interacting with the opposite sex. In social communication, people are often more sensitive to the speech and behavior of the opposite sex, so they also pay attention to the elegance of their speech in front of the opposite sex [9]. But women tend to use euphemisms more often than men on the same topic. Lakoff claims that “women are experts in euphemisms” [10]. Female discourse tends to be indirect and euphemistic, while male discourse is more direct. However, gender differences in the use of euphemisms are not absolute but are also influenced by other factors, such as social status and education. It is closely related to the choice of context and topic.

4.1.2. Social Status

The use of euphemisms also depends on the social status and role relationships of the participants in the communication. People tend to use euphemisms more in the context of “power relationships” than in the context of “intimate relationships”. For example, the use of euphemisms is necessary when a student is speaking to a teacher or a subordinate is speaking to a superior, regardless of the personal factors (e.g., gender) of the parties involved in the communication. It gives respect to the other party and makes a good impression. On the other hand, the closer the relationship between classmates, friends and colleagues, the less likely euphemisms are to be used.

4.1.3. Educational Level

Labov confirms that the speaker’s socio-economic status, level of education and the context in which he or she is speaking may all have an impact on speech performance [11]. Generally speaking, the more educated a person is, the more he or she pays attention to his or her behaviour, the more “civilized” he or she is, and the more he or she uses euphemisms. However, some scholars believe that the more educated people are more emancipated in their thinking, and on the contrary, they do not care much about some taboo words, and tend to use euphemisms less [8].

4.2. Communicative Occasion

Social situations are another factor that affects the use of euphemisms, and people make different choices in different social situations. In general, people tend to use euphemisms more often in formal situations [12]. For example, euphemisms are widely used in court or in diplomatic situations. In other informal situations, such as conversations between friends, euphemisms are used less often.

5. Conclusion

In the environment of global economic integration, euphemisms play an important role as the lubricant of language communication. The use of euphemisms can better avoid linguistic taboos, make people’s communication more in line with people’s psychology, and enable people’s communication to proceed smoothly. It can be seen that euphemism is not just a linguistic phenomenon, but also a sociological phenomenon. Therefore, it is necessary to analyse euphemisms from the perspective of sociolinguistics. This paper firstly briefly introduces the definition of euphemism, and on the basis of reviewing relevant literature, discusses the sociolinguistics function of euphemism from the perspective of sociolinguistics. As a sociolinguistics phenomenon, euphemisms are used differently in different contexts, and this paper carries out further research on the relationship between euphemisms and contexts based on relevant literature. Affected by the length

of the paper, there are deficiencies in this paper, and it does not analyze euphemisms from other perspectives such as social psychology. Euphemisms have the characteristics of “metabolism” and are updated very quickly. Therefore, it is very necessary to compile a dictionary of euphemisms, which is convenient for others to learn and research. The author sincerely hopes that this article can help people understand the characteristics and pragmatic functions of euphemisms, and be able to use euphemisms flexibly in communication according to different contexts, so as to better complete cross-cultural communication.

References

- [1] Enright. *Fair of Speech: The Uses of Euphemism* [M]. London: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- [2] Trudgill, Peter. *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979.
- [3] Chen Wangdao. *Rhetoric spreads* [M]. Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2008:56.
- [4] Edward Sapir. *Language: An introduction to the study of speech*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and company, 1921.
- [5] Chen Yuan. *Sociolinguistics* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Xuelin Publishing House, 1983.
- [6] Lu Wei. Analysis of English euphemism [J]. *Journal of Yunnan University of Finance and Trade (Social Science Edition)* 2005 (2):148-149.
- [7] Yang Caiying. Discussion on American social phenomena and the use of English Euphemism [J]. *Journal of Sichuan Vocational and Technical College* .2005 (1) : 46-49.
- [8] Li Junhua. *Research on Chinese Euphemism* [M]. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2010.
- [9] Shu Dingfang, Xu Jinyuan.(1995). Euphemism research: Review and prospect. *Foreign Languages (Journal of Shanghai International Studies University)*(05).
- [10] Lakoff, R. T. (1975). *Language and Woman's Place: Text and Commentaries*. New York: Harper & Row.
- [11] Labov, W. (1972). *Sociolinguistic patterns*. U. Pennsylvania Press.
- [12] Gu T Q. (2006). Sociolinguistic analysis of euphemism. *Journal of China West Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*(01),47-50. doi:10.16246/j.cnki.51-1674/c.2006.01.013.