

Euphemism and the Violation of the Cooperative Principle

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Abstract

It is clear that euphemism is a form of language intentionally created in different language communities and diverse social levels. Speakers can remove direct speech to weaken the negative association and uncomfortable feelings provoked by the euphemized object. However, in linguistic communication, euphemism is opposite to the cooperation principle, though it is closely relevant to politeness.

Keywords: Euphemism, Cooperative Principle, Violation, Four Maxims

1. Literature Review

In everyday life, we often need to communicate with others about some topics that may bring ourselves and others much embarrassment or discomfort. To decrease or avoid such results, people sometimes use euphemism. As is stated, “Without euphemisms the world would grind, uncoiled, to a halt, universal animosity covering all (Enright, 1985).” In western countries English euphemism has been studied for a long history. In the early 1580s, British author used firstly the term “euphemism” and defined it as a good or favorable interpretation of a bad word (Neaman and Silver, 1983). Menken, an American linguist, explicated the origin of hundreds of English euphemisms and why they became popular (Shu and Xu, 1995). In 1983, *Kind Words—A Thesaurus of Euphemisms* was published. In this book which was of great referential value for euphemism study, the formation of euphemisms, the movies for euphemizing and many examples were expounded. The publication of *Fair of Speech* which was compiled by D. J. Enright, each essay in which was concerned with one particular aspect of the use of euphemism. After that, there also appeared many other significant books.

In China, when it was in Ming Dynasty, the scholar Lurong described taboo and euphemism in his early book. However, he did not provide a systematic study of euphemism. In the early 20th century, Chen Wangdao and many other language researchers started a rhetoric study of euphemism. In the 1970s many Chinese linguists were influenced by the sociolinguistics theory in western countries. Chen Yuan’s book *Sociolinguistics* was published, in which he provided a detailed description of euphemism. In 2001, *Figure and Vocabulary*, the most elaborate book describing euphemism in China, written by Li Guonan was published. Euphemism was described in greater details, including the feature, formation, cultural connotation and variation of euphemism.

In recent years, with the development of society and culture, some domestic and foreign scholars have begun to study euphemism from the perspective of sociolinguistics. In this thesis, the author uses literature method, experience summarizing and data analysis to do preliminary studied.

2. Introduction

2.1 *The Introduction of Euphemism*

2.1.1 The Definition of Euphemism

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 meaning of the word euphemism is speaking well.

It is known that euphemism, regarded as “a whitewashing device”, is a polite word or expression that you use instead of a more direct one to avoid shocking or upsetting someone. Euphemism has been defined differently in different books. In the search for an acceptable definition of euphemism, each one providing a specific insight to this strategy: the rhetorical, the literary and the linguistic, etc.

In my opinion, euphemism is a word or phrase or communication style, which is used in a specific context to soften or conceal something unpleasant. Even though euphemism cannot simply be equal to lying, since it allows one to talk about uncomfortable subjects and not simply cut them down or replace them by their antonyms, but by naming it in a more pleasant way or by focusing on a specific, less distressing detail of it.

2.1.2 The characteristics of euphemism

Generally speaking, euphemisms are characterized by updatability, temporal spirit and the regional trait.

a. The updatability of euphemisms' rules, criteria, principles

The updatability of euphemisms is comparative with the euphemized object. While the euphemized object does not change, dated euphemisms are substituted by new euphemisms. With time going by people are familiar with the euphemism, and the association it provoked is no less than the direct speech. And the functions such as "avoiding" and "covering up" die down gradually and even cannot achieve the goal of euphemizing the object. At this moment, a new euphemism will come into its existence to achieve better effect. For example, in English, the euphemism of “酒吧” originated from the French word “saloon”, and replaced by “tavern”, “bar”, and the present “cocktail lounge” in consequence.

b. The temporal spirit of euphemisms

The temporal spirit of euphemisms can be reflected in two aspects: one is caused by the change of the euphemized object; another is that one euphemized object may bear different euphemisms at different times. The former includes the disappearance of the original euphemized object, the elevations of the status of the original euphemized object, the descending of the status the things that does not need to be euphemized before, new things appear and need to be euphemized; the latter mainly refers to form euphemisms with the contemporary things to indicate the euphemized object.

When the euphemized object disappears, the direct speech used to express it will soon be abandoned, so the euphemism accordingly will disappear from our life. For instance, in ancient times, women's feet were tangled. So there were some euphemisms to express “小脚” (xiao jiao, small feet), such as “金莲”, “莲足”, and so on (Zhang, 1996). After the new China was founded, this custom was abolished, “小脚” disappeared gradually, and its corresponding euphemisms also became out of use.

On the contrary, some things that did not need to be euphemized in the past need euphemisms for the reason that their status descend. In feudal times, it is common to hear the titles like “佣人” and “老妈子” (yong ren/lao mazi, servants). Nevertheless, with the disappearance of the social levels, the equality of social status and occupations such as “阿姨”(a yi, waiter), “家政服务员”(jia zheng fu wu yuan, waiter) is realized by more and more people.

c. The regional trait of euphemisms

There are differences of euphemisms not only among different language communities but

also in different regions in the same language community. And the regional trait can be reflected in two aspects: the differences of the usage of words and regional cultures.

In different regions, different customs have different euphemisms. For example, improper relations between man and woman is called "leg over situations" while in Australia, it is called "feature with their partners" (Cong, 2001). Similarly, old people are called "the elderly" in China while they are called to be "people with a happier age" in Singapore. These differences result from different customs not rational.

In one language community, the regional cultural differences are reflected in two aspects: some euphemisms only exist in some certain regions and do not exist in other regions; the same euphemized object enjoys diverse kinds of euphemisms because of different regional cultures. For example, along the coast, working on water is a main part of people living there, so the safety on the water is critical. So when people are having fishing, fishing one side of it and will start another side, they will use "put it right" to instead of "turn over".

2.2 The Introduction of Cooperative Principle

2.2.1 Four maxims of the cooperative principle

The cooperative principle defined by Grice is that speakers are supposed to observe CP in the conversation and there are some sub-principles called conversational maxims that become the basic of the CP. The maxims are as follows:

a. Quantity

- (1) Where one tries to be as informative as possible.
- (2) Do not make your contribution more informative than is needed.

b. Quality: where one tries to be true.

- (1) Do not provide what you say is false.
- (2) Do not say the information that is lack for evidence.

Relation: Be relevant and the context are related to the discussion.

c. Manner: Be perspicuous.

- (1) Avoid obscurity of expression.
- (2) Avoid ambiguity.
- (3) Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
- (4) Be orderly. (Grice, 1975)

In short, speakers should follow the maxims so as to communicate in a high-efficiency, rational, cooperative way when offering sufficient information.

2.2.2 The Nature of the Maxims

The maxims are more like guidelines rather than rules. The maxims can be creatively flouted and are to be followed by and large, to the best of one's ability.

The maxims are not such conventions bounded by culture. They are logically expected to be valuable in any human society. Rice claims that similar maxims govern any cooperative activity. However, there are cultural differences to be marked.

3. Euphemism---A Way of Violating of the Cooperative Principle

As a kind of pragmatic phenomenon, euphemism should be influenced by Grice's theory of conversational implication. However, in terms of verbal communication, speakers often violate the cooperative principle in order to achieve a certain purpose and effects.

3.1 The Violation of the Quantity Maxim

The first rule of quantity maxim requires that speakers show euphemism by changing the surface meaning, but they provide information which is no less than the amount of information needed to talk, and acronym and abbreviation are basic method to constitute euphemism, so euphemism often use omission in order to create an ideal condition. For example, people often use "TB" to instead of "tuberculosis", "WC" instead of "water closet" and so on. It eliminates certain words to make it be semantic ambiguity or conceal the vulgar and harsh part. For example, pregnant is ashamed to speak, so with "She is expecting" instead of "She is expecting a baby".

The second rule of quantity maxim prescribes contribution that speakers make should not be more informative than is needed. In real situation, euphemism is contrary to this.

3.2 The Violation of the Quality Maxim

Quality maxim requires speakers should not say what is false or what they lack adequate evidence. However, it sometimes overstates the facts, and sometimes it understates the original defects or deficiencies. Some scholars point out that euphemism should be called "language of deceit" or "gilded words".

In 1960s when the euphemisms of occupation emerged, with the development of the civil rights movement and women's liberation movement, the poor, women and who were discriminated or had menial jobs were done in a name of a decent title, although their actual status did not improve. For example, the word "engineer" is commonly used instead of "mechanic" to refer to people who are proficient in a particular field and respected by the society. Similar to this, people use "landscape architect" instead of "gardener", "meat technologist" instead of "butcher". These euphemisms intentionally exaggeratedly describe the facts.

Although people acknowledge some facts, they tend to conceal the seriousness of the matter and avoid the full statement of fact to be polite. For example, "an ugly man" is said to be "a plain man".

3.3 The Violation of the Relation Maxim

The relation maxim requires the speech should be relative to the subject, while because of special reasons; the speakers deliberately use words or expressions which are not related to the conversation topics (Grice, 1975). “To die” is euphemistically said to be “to pass away”, it clearly violate the maxim of relevance. These two expressions have a common meaning, but the difference between them is the time, the former is "forever", and the latter is "moment".

3.4 The Violation of the Manner Maxim

Euphemism goes against the first three rules of manner maxim. It makes the expression be obscure. Sometimes euphemism gives a fuzzy processing to a specific meaning to reach the aim of indirect expression (Rundquist, 1983). For example, for the sake of telling people their pants zippers are not pulled, Americans tend to use "You've lost your license".

The second rule of manner maxim is to avoid vagueness. Speakers choose commendatory words and sweet words to replace or modify the neutral or derogatory words. For example, the "first class" on the plane is renamed as "delux class" or "premium class"; the name of "third class" tends to have damaged the dignity of passengers, so it is called "business class" or "travel class".

The third rule of manner maxim is to avoid unnecessary prolixity, but sometimes in the actual communication, "prolixity" is necessary and the characters convey clear and rich information. For example, “Perhaps you had better get your affairs in order.” This is the doctors' death notice issue to critically ill patients.

4. Conclusion

Euphemism is a variation form of the general language produced to comply with the principle of communication and violate of the cooperative principles. The information it carries is more abundant in the form. The implicit and associative meaning is more interesting. When communicators violate of a maxim or a few maxims due to use euphemisms, their words then have special meanings.

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From 2016 to the first half year of 2017, she worked in Jilin Business and Technology College to teach college English. Since September of 2017, she has been working in Changchun campus of Jilin Normal University. On holidays, she always works in some private school to teach high school students. She published *Psycho-linguistic Model Analysis of College English Listening Teaching* (2016.08) and *Pragmatic Function and Translation Studies of Vague Language in Companies' English advertisements* (2016.11) in Yalujiang Literature Monthly, and she published the *Studies of Cognitive Linguistics applying in English Word Teaching* (2017/26) and *On the Translation Methods of English Advertising Slogans* (2017/28) in English on Campus.

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