

A Tentative Study on English Euphemism

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Abstract: The word “euphemism” comes from the Greek, eu--means “good”, and -pheme-, “speech” or “saying”, and together it means literally “to speak with good words or in a pleasant manner”. Euphemism, as a cultural phenomenon as well as a linguistic concept, has attracted people’s attention for a long time. It has long been a topic of much interest. In every society there are certain things that are supposed to be unspeakable. Many words make someone embarrassed, unhappy, dislike or fear when used in communication. If we express the meaning directly, we will make such impression which is vulgar, frivolous, and impolite. In order to avoid the embarrassment or ease the sting of harsh words, man has created euphemisms.

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1 Introduction

“Euphemism is defined in the New Edition of the Oxford Concise Dictionary (1976) as ‘Substitution of mild or vague or roundabout expression for harsh or direct one; expression thus substituted.’ IN Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary (1973) the definition reads, ‘Substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive expression for one that may offend or suggest something unpleasant.’” “Encyclopedia Britannica (1994) also defines euphemism as ‘a figure of speech in which something of an unpleasant, distressing or indelicate nature is described in less offensive terms’”. Here are some of definitions:

(1) “(example of the) use of pleasant, mild or indirect words or phrases in place of more accurate or direct

ones.”

(2) “a polite word or expression that you use instead of a more direct one to avoid shocking or upsetting someone.”

(3) “a less direct word used instead of one that is harsh or blunt when referring to something unpleasant or embarrassing.”

(4) “Substitution of mild or vague or roundabout expression for harsh or direct one; Expression thus substituted.”

(5) “a polite word or expression that people use to talk about something unpleasant or embarrassing, such as death and sex.”

(6) “A euphemism is used as an alternative to a dispreferred expression, in order to avoid possible loss of face: Either one’s own face or, through giving offence, that of the audience, or of some third party.”

This paper introduces the origin of euphemism, the features of euphemism and the functions of euphemism. In the last part, is about the use of euphemism in our daily life.

2 The origin of euphemisms

2.1 The religious origin of English euphemism

In the ancient times, because of the limit of technology and science, people believed in God and ghosts. They believed that many unexplainable phenomena are the results of God, hence they had a worship to supernatural things. The names of God and ghosts are the earliest euphemisms. In the Western countries, almost everybody believes in God, they don’t call the name of God—Jehoval directly. Instead, there creates many euphemisms: “the Almighty, the Supreme Being, Holy One, the Eternal, the creator, the maker, the Savior, the Lord of Lords, the King of Kings”. In China, there are also many euphemisms related to religion, for example:

people call a monk or a nun as “Pu Sa”, “Da Shi”; call weasel as “Huang Xian” and fox as “Hu Xian”. And the Ten Commandments of Bible has prescribed, “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that takes his name in vain.” That’s why there are so many euphemisms. In oral English, using “God” causally would be considered blasphemous. If someone say “God damn it” he is treason and heresy, and would be punished. Some of them adopt the semantic method, such as the Creator, the Maker, the Supreme (Being), Holy One, the Almighty, the Eternal, Our Father, the Savior, King of Kings, Lord of lords, the Light of the World, Sovereign of the Universe. Some of them adopt the phonetic method, such as Gad, Gosh, Golly, Godfrey etc. There are many euphemisms for “the devil”, such as old enemy, old Ned, Old Nick, Old One, Ole’un (Old Man), Old Scratch, Old Serpent, the Old Boy etc. For example, “He was frightened as if Old Harry were before him.” In English they often use “heck” instead of “hell”. “hell” has other expressions: “the other place, a very uncomfortable place, the other way etc.” For example, “We were all going direct to Heaven; we were all going direct the other way^[1].”

2.2 To avoid vulgarity and inelegance

Both in Western and China, all the things related to disease, death, excretion and sex are regarded as vulgarity and inelegance. So people creates many euphemisms to beautify them, for example: “thin” and “skinny” are replaced by “slim” and “slender”; “fat/corpulent” becomes “plump”, “strong” and “stout”. In the Middle Ages, people thought these words like leg, breast, thigh and pregnancy are closely related to sex, so there creates the following euphemisms: “piano’s limbs”(piano’s leg); “white meat” (chicken breast); “dark meat” (chicken thigh). And as for death, there are many euphemisms. The euphemisms for death are a widely used, especially when it concerns one’s own families and friends. It has a lot of expressions. For example, if anything should happen to me (= when I die); to pass away/ on; to depart; to go to sleep; to be no longer with us; to be interred. “Death” also has some humorous expressions: “to pop off; to push up daisies; to cash in one’s chips; to kick the bucket”. “Death” also has an intimate relationship with religion. There are many euphemisms from Bible, for example, to return to dust/earth; to pay the debt of nature; to be called to God/to answer the final summons; to go to heaven; to be at peace, to be asleep in the Arms of God; to yield up

the ghost; to launch into eternity; to have one’s name inscribed in the Book of life etc. Some words, which concern “death”, also have euphemistic expressions. For example, “coffin” is called “casket”; “dead body” is called “earthly remains”; “funeral” is called “memorial service”; “graveyard” is called “memory garden”.

Most westerners avoid talking about some serious diseases. For instance, “terminally ill” is a euphemism for “cancer”; American and British newspapers often name “syphilis” as “social disease”; “leprosy” is called “Hansen’s disease”; “constipation” is called “irregularity”. “tumor” is called “a growth”; “commit suicide” is called “self-deliverance or self-violence”. People often use initialing to avoid talk about some diseases directly, such as AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome); Big C (Cancer); VD (Venereal Disease) etc. “to die because of a crash” is called “old Newton took him”; “hara-kiri” is called “happy dispatch”; “an unnatural death” is called “to be blown across the creek” Nearly all languages consider “sex” a taboo word. In the west, when children asked their parents where they came from, their parents often answered the baby was a visit from the stork. People can say “pregnant” instead of “expecting” or “in the family way”; “fart” is also written into the dictionary^[2]. You can say it directly instead of saying, “wind from behind” It is just because of the movement of “sex liberty” and “sex liberation”.

People can have a freer talk about “sex” than Victorian age. On the contrary, some other new euphemisms for sex appeared one after another. “Sexual knowledge” is called “facts of life”; “pornographic movies” is called “adult films”; “cohabitation” has become very common in western society. It is also called a kind of marriage: “trial marriage” or “unmarried wife”. Nevertheless, with the sharp increase of the rate of divorce, there appeared many euphemisms for divorce: “to break up”, “to split up, and “matchruptcy” (a blending of “match” and “bankruptcy”). And the homosexuality would be called “Greek arts”, “queer”, “gay”. There is another interesting phrase “to go to Reno”. “Reno”, a small city in the west of Nevada, is famous for its easy and fast procedures of divorce. So “to go to Reno” also becomes a euphemism for divorce.

2.3 To be politeness

In our society, people always treat each other politely, and the use of euphemisms can make other people pleasant, for example: in the western countries, the old people don’t like to be called “old people”, because they

always connect old and weak. Therefore, in English, people often use “past one’s prime”, “getting on years”; use “senior citizens” the longer-lived, seasoned men instead of “old people”. The age, especially a woman’s age is regarded as a sensitive privacy. And most of the western people are afraid of getting old, so they call “old people” “senior citizens”. “old age” and “senility” can easily cause the fear of the old people. Some euphemistic expressions take the place of them, such as “getting on (in years), past one’s prime, feeling one’s age, second childhood, a distinguished gentleman, a third age”. The old people become “an elder statesman” or “old age pensioner” or even use initialing “OAP”. They are not “old” but “long-lived”^[3]. Old people’s home, of course, is not an ideal place for old men to live in. There are many euphemistic expressions: a home for adults, a nursing home, a rest home, a private hospital, a convalescent hospital. The old people who live there are called euphemistically “a resident”.

In western country, it is very impolite if you talk about someone’s figure and weight without reservation. If someone is “fat”, “overweight” is often used to replace it. “weight-watchers” is also a euphemism for “fat people”. To female, “a fat girl” is called “a fuller figure or plump”; to male, “fat” is called “stout”; to child, it is called “chubby”. On the contrary, if someone is too thin, euphemism is also used. To male, it is called “lean”, and to female, it is called “slim, slender, willowy or svelte”.

3 The functions of euphemisms

3.1 Substitution

According to the definitions of euphemism and we know that a great number of English euphemisms serve as the substitutions for verbal taboos. The term taboo (ta meaning “mark”, boo meaning “exceedingly”) of Polynesian origin denotes anything linguistic and nonlinguistic, which is prohibited or forbidden. Taboo refers to the situation in which a word or name can be used in a community only under special conditions, whether only by certain persons or only in certain circumstances. Just as violating a cultural taboo can be quite offensive, so is it with a verbal taboo in press conferences. The “word” has been and continues to be in most societies perceived as a powerful instrument that may evoke evil spirits, make bad things happen and instigate to violence and revolution and numerous other activities. While taboo of words occurs when

a particular topic is considered valid for discussion, euphemistic expression or terms are required^[4]. So diplomatic euphemisms have a very serious reason for being. They can conceal the things people fear most—death, the dead or the supernatural. Euphemisms can also eliminate unhappiness, embarrassment and fear etc. so as to relieve people psychologically.

3.2 Politeness

Politeness is another very important function that euphemisms serve in social life. “Some of the euphemisms are used to avoid crudeness and indecency for the sake of a polite conversation. “Grice formulated Cooperative Principle of utterance in which the Maxim of Manner was defined as “Be perspicuous and specific; To avoid obscurity; To avoid ambiguity; To be brief and to be orderly.” The roundabout nature of euphemisms goes against the Maxim of Manner, which can only be fairly explained well by Leech’s Politeness Principle “Approbation Maxim: minimize dispraise of other, maximize praise of other”. In other words, euphemisms are to minimize impolite expressions and maximize polite expressions.

3.3 Disguise

Besides the two functions of euphemisms mentioned above, there is still another one more important function at work in euphemistic communication, namely, the Disguise Function. Here we mean that because of the vagueness of euphemisms, it has become a very important tool for political leaders or the diplomats or statesmen to distort the facts or and present a false picture of peace and prosperity and to beautify whatever the authority have done. For example, in the Iraq War, they use “Operation Iraqi Freedom” for beautifying their military invasion, “possible movement” refers to military attack, “air operation” or “air strikes” for air attack, “enter the war” to show their reluctance to fight the war etc^[5]. and we may find many such kind of these euphemisms in press conferences. The most important and ultimate function or purpose of the use of diplomatic euphemisms in press conferences is to disguise or beautify their invasive essence or other evil actions or the separation of words from truth. In American and British societies nowadays, diplomatic euphemisms are always purposely devised to disguise scandals in wars and politics, deliberately invented to beautify lowly occupations and excessively inflated to promote sales in advertisement.

4 The features of euphemisms

4.1 Nationality

Euphemism is a universal phenomenon in the world culture, but different countries have different manners of production, different manners of living and different cultures, and these differences also show in euphemisms. In the western countries, the word “poor” stands for low social class, so there are many euphemisms replacing it, for example in the following paragraph: I used to think I was poor. Then they told me I wasn’t poor, I was needy. Then they said it was self-defeating to think of myself as needy, that I was culturally deprived. Then they told me deprived was a bad image, that I was under privileged^[6]. Then they told me that underprivileged was overused, that I was disadvantaged. I still don’t have a dime but I have a great vocabulary!” (Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage). In this paragraph, we use four words to replace poor: needy、culturally deprived)、underprivileged、disadvantaged.

4.2 Regional differences

Usually euphemism is related to customs, for example bread is a necessity in British families, so we can see “take bread out of someone’s mouth”. And the word “humble” is formed by these two words: umble and numbles. These two words both refer to the viscera of animals, especially deer. And 1000 years ago, only the aristocrat can eat the pie made of venison, and the slaves can only eat pies made of viscera of deer.

4.3 Age and gender

Different people may use different words to express the same things, especially between man and woman, children and adults, for example: women often say “to powder one’s nose, to freshen up” while men will say “to go to the toilet, to relieve oneself because nature calls” and the children would say “go to the pot and make number one”^[7].

4.4 Times

The change of language is decided by the need and

development of society. As time goes by, many new words appear and many disappear. To euphemisms, it is the same, for example, we use different word to express “pregnant”: Cancel all her social engagements(1856); Be an interesting condition (1890); be in a delicate condition (1895); be knitting little booties (1910); be in a family way (1920); be expecting (1935); be pregnant (1956).

5 Conclusion

Euphemism is a universal phenomenon in our life. It appears because of religion, to avoid vulgarity and inelegance and to be polite. It serves several functions: politeness, substitution and disguise. And euphemism has its own features: nationality, region, age and gender, times. These elements influence its formation and applications in our life. As English learners, we should pay our attention to its origin, the features, its functions and its influences in our life and learn how to use euphemisms appropriately to make our life more beautiful.

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