

A Pragmatic Analysis of the English Euphemism

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Abstract: Euphemism is a vague expression to substitute for one thought to be unpleasant or disrespectful. English euphemism is not only a figure of speech but also a cultural phenomenon. It universally appears in human languages and diverse social environments. In order to use a subtle way to relieve irritation and pressure on others, people usually employ euphemism in communication. To be specific, it means having a loan of other words to express something unpleasant. The thesis tries to explain why understanding and choosing euphemisms relies on context, and how euphemisms are used by people, following the Politeness Principle, as well as violating the Cooperative Principle. The author does emphasize the indirectness of the English euphemism and the relationship between it and Indirect Speech Acts in which the innovation lies. What is more, to reduce the pragmatic failure and improve the effect of inter-cultural communication, the author attempts to help people be fully aware of the English euphemism and put it into usage properly.

1. Introduction

With the gradual development of the society, the scope of interpersonal communication has been wider and wider. Seeking an appropriate way to achieve the communication smoothly and make the parties involved feel pleasant becomes obviously significant. However, the euphemism is a proper expression to achieve this goal. There are two popular methods to define euphemism: first, using an unclear and ambiguous way which makes others be pleasant to replace the disrespectful expressions that include disagreeable meaning (Hartmann & Stock 1981); second, using a euphemistic and soft way to express some facts and thought in order to decrease the degree of vulgarity (Jean dubios 1973). It can be easily realized that euphemism is a linguistic phenomenon and an important communicative method in a specific situation. People consciously avoid applying the language which can make others feel uncomfortable or damage their relationship, instead they employ an inflectional linguistic form to express thoughts and exchange of information. Meanwhile, euphemism as a sociocultural phenomenon has influenced all the aspects of people's daily life and reflects the wide range of social phenomena or human mind, such as avoiding offending others, being in place of taboos, being polite and etc. Therefore, it is a highly used rhetorical device in daily life and has a long history and a profound cultural foundation.

As an indispensable part in the process of human communication, euphemism plays a significant role in adjusting the interpersonal relationship. Every society, every speech community, and every

social class has its own specific method to express euphemistic expression. Therefore, it is very necessary for us to study the English euphemism from the pragmatic aspect. Be advised that papers in a technically unsuitable form will be returned for retyping. After returned the manuscript must be appropriately modified.

2. Definition of the English Euphemism

The word euphemism comes from the Greek word (euphemia), meaning "the use of words of good omen" (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euphemism>), with the prefix eu (=good, sounding well) and the root pheme(=speech or saying). The term euphemism itself was used as a euphemism by the ancient Greeks, meaning "to keep a holy silence" (speaking well by not speaking at all). The literal meaning of euphemism is with nice words or a delightful way to express more indirectly. Thus, euphemism means to say "nice things" or "flattering words".

The English euphemism has a close link to context. The essential characteristics of euphemism lie in its agreeableness, indirection and ambiguity. It is also called indirect speech in pragmatics. In our daily communication, people usually violate the Cooperative Principle and observe the Politeness Principle and Face Theory.

To be frank, there are a lot of definitions of euphemism and the followings are more influential.

(1) A polite, tactful or less explicit term used to avoid the direct naming of an unpleasant, painful, or frightening reality. (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, 1961)

(2) A figure of speech which consists in the substitution of a word or expression of comparatively favorable implication or less unpleasant associations instead of the harsher or more offensive one that would more precisely designate what is intended. (*Oxford English Dictionary*)

(3) 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 [1]. (Allan and Burridge 1991: 18)

(4) A mild or vague expression substituted for one thought to be too harsh or direct. (*Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 9th edition, 1995)

(5) A euphemism is a generally innocuous word or expression used in place of one that may be found offensive or suggest something unpleasant. (*Webster's Online Dictionary*)

All the above definitions of euphemism are mostly from the perspective of semantics. While in fact, euphemisms are not only made up of words, phrases, sentences, discourses and even body languages in a particular context can be regarded as euphemisms. Furthermore, the generation of euphemism is a dynamic process but not a stable one, and as the time went by, euphemism may even lose the original euphemistic meaning and be replaced by new ones. Therefore, we define euphemism as the followings: Euphemism is a mild, vague, pleasant or polite expression to substitute an unpleasant, embarrassing or impolite one by a linguistic or non-linguistic means in a certain context [2].

3. Classification of the English Euphemism

Euphemism can be involved in very extensive fields including titles, death, disease, occupation, political, military, and other categories. In terms of diverse standards, it is classified differently.

3.1 Positive Euphemism and Negative Euphemism

According to Hugh Rawson (1981), English euphemism can be classified into two general types: positive euphemism and negative euphemism in terms of semantics.

Negative euphemism is a kind of euphemistic expression for taboos. For example, in people's daily communication, when talking about something that are unacceptable, or very harsh and rude, people will use some of the indirect expression to replace them. In this way, the euphemistic expression can make it easier to accept each other and reduce the stimulation of the listener. For instance, when talking about death, people always say “to go home, the call of god, to sleep forever” and so on; when it comes to some physiological needs, people will use a variety of euphemisms to express, such as “pee” for “piss” and “BM” for “bowel movement”. These euphemisms of body excretions, disease, death and burial, etc. all belong to negative euphemism.

On the contrary, positive euphemism is a nice or fair word for saving face to please or compliment others, and has nothing to do with taboos. For example, in communication people use “beautician” for “barber”, “grief therapist” for “undertaker” and “plain” for “ugly”. The positive euphemism is a kind of semantic ascension, which is opposite to negative euphemism.

3.2 Conscious Euphemism and Unconscious Euphemism

“All euphemisms, whether positive or negative, may be used either consciously or unconsciously” [3]. (Rawson 1981:3) In this way euphemisms can be divided into “unconscious euphemisms” and “conscious euphemisms”. This classification is made according to whether people can remember the original intention of the euphemism or not.

Because of long time, the original meanings of some words are forgotten by people, then the euphemistic meanings are regarded as the original one. This kind of euphemism is called unconscious euphemism. For example, the word “cemetery” originating from Greek means “dormitory or sleeping place”. While since it served as a euphemism for “graveyard” from the fourteenth century, people have regarded “graveyard” as its original meaning due to a long time use though the euphemistic meaning still exists.

However, a major feature of conscious euphemism is pun, which is to say that people in general are aware that they are using overtones. The euphemism stands for something else, and everyone pretends that the “something else” does not exist. This kind of examples are from everywhere. When a customer says he wants to wash his hands, he intends to go to the toilet. Such kind of euphemism is favored in daily communication activities.

3.3 Instantaneous Euphemism and Continuous Euphemism

We can also divide English euphemism into “instantaneous euphemism” and “continuous euphemism” in accordance with the frequency that it has been used. As the name suggests, instantaneous euphemism refers to a clear “temporary” and is not often be employed. Sometimes girls say “My menstruation came” to “I felt off the roof” instead, while actually the common euphemism of this sentence is “I am unwell”.

Otherwise, continuous euphemism is related to the ready language unit that is popular in a certain time. This type of euphemism becomes idiom after repeated use, which contributes to be an integral part in English. The universally acknowledged things like “pregnancy”, “death”, “oldness”, “privation” and “toilet” all can be realized by various synonymous euphemisms to replace them from all sorts of books. When “privation” is involved, the following euphemisms are in the mind: prepositional phrases “in reduced circumstances, out of pocket, in difficulties”, adjectives and adjective phrase “underprivileged, needy, disadvantaged, culturally deprived”, noun phrases “negative saver, low income”, adverbial phrase “badly off, hard up” and so on.

3.4 Classification from Scopes

Due to having a strong persuasive and a good modification effect, English euphemism is highly popular from all levels throughout life and every corner. Meanwhile, it has been an indelible part of English culture. As far as the scopes of English euphemism are concerned in daily life, they can be divided into occupation euphemism, death euphemism, disease euphemism, politics and war euphemism, etc. For example, “custodian” for “janitor”, “breathe one’s last” for “die”, “have a heart condition” for “heart disease”, and “wasting the enemy” for “Vietnam War”

According to different standards and angles, we classify English euphemism in various ways. By doing this, people have an all-round and a clearer picture of the features of English euphemism so as to use them appropriately in communication.

4. The English Euphemism and Context

4.1 Context

Different linguists have different interpretations as for what is included in the context. Frankly, the language system is objective. It provides us with the form of a series of language use. And the ability of language users determines their mastery of the linguistic forms and the choice of concrete forms in different environments. For example, in English we always call a person “John Smith”, “Professor Smith”, “Sir” or “John” or simple “mate”. In fact, not all these forms are appropriate in all situations. Maybe only one or two are proper in a specific context. Lyons (1977) illustrates that a person who is able to judge the appropriateness of an utterance must possess certain knowledge. And the knowledge constitutes the context.

As for pragmatics, the context makes the participants understand each other in communication. Thus, possessing the common language knowledge is quite significant for the participants. Besides, participants should distinguish concrete context. The process of communication is not static but dynamic, and in this dynamic process new discourses are produced, which both on the grammatical and semantic meaning are associated with the original words. So the meaning of a discourse should be understood in the context. Only in this way can the communication be successful in a pragmatic sense.

Furthermore, culture is closely related to the context. It means a total way of life of a people, including the patterns of belief, customs, objects, institutions, techniques, and language. The background information, as a part of the culture, is of a great influence to understand the specific context. Therefore, in order to achieve the communicative goal, we have to analyse the context with a cultural view.

4.2 The English Euphemism and Context

Human communication is produced in the social context. And whether an expression is an English euphemism or not, it depends on the pragmatic context that consists of the concrete time, place, topic, participant, cultural background, moral value, religion as well as status of the speaker and the relationship with the listener, etc. Different contexts lead to different interpretation. For example, in the formal situation “go to W.C.” should be replaced by “wash hands”, “excuse for a while” and so on.

As mentioned above, the English euphemism depends on the cultural background and it as a common phenomenon in all cultures is considered as a mirror that reflects the native speakers’ customs, reliefs, attitudes, worldviews and so on. Thus, from the use of the English euphemism we can infer the characteristics of the English speaker and their culture. For example, the Christian

religion have a marked impact on English culture. When people died, English speakers often use euphemistic expressions to substitute the unpleasant word “death” which may arouse sadness and depressions, such as “to be called to God”, or “go to the heaven”. Also, in English culture, people are sensitive to professional equal, especially some people with low social status. Thus, there are much more euphemisms related to profession, such as “service manager” for “air-hostess”, “domestic engineer” for “housewife”, and “solid-waste ecologist” for “garbage collector”.

In a given context, participants should choose appropriate euphemisms to achieve the purpose of communication. If the participants understand the social context very thoroughly and select the appropriate euphemisms, the communication will go smoothly. It requires to choose different expressions. In a word, the English euphemism is closely related to the context and the context also has a great influence on it.

5. The English Euphemism and the Cooperative Principle

Actually, in the social communication the speaker's language behavior is controlled by certain principles and one of the principles is the Cooperative Principle.

5.1 The Cooperative Principle

Grice believes that in most conversational exchanges, there must be some mechanisms governing the production and comprehension of utterances. This principle, termed by Grice the Cooperative Principle (CP), is regarded as the basis of achieving a smooth communication. “Stated in simple terms, the CP provides that you should say what you have to say, when you have to say it, and the way you have to say it.” (Zhang Maizeng 1998: 12)

Meanwhile, Grice divides the Cooperative Principle into four specific maxims:

(1) The Maxim of Quantity

- A) Make your contributions as informative as is required (for the current purpose of the exchange):
- B) Do not make your contributions more informative than is required.

(2) The Maxim of Quality

- A) Do not say what you believe to be false;
- B) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

(3) The Maxim of Relation: make your contributions relevant.

(4) The Maxim of Manner: be perspicuous, and specifically

- A) avoid obscurity of expression;
- B) avoid ambiguity;
- C) be orderly [4].

(Grice 1975: 45-47)

In brief, participants should obey these maxims in order to conduct communication in an efficient, rational and cooperative way. Thus, they should speak sincerely, relevantly and clearly while providing sufficient information.

5.2 Violation of the Cooperative Principle

In general, in communication people are required to observe the Cooperative Principle. But in fact, these maxims are not always obeyed to meet certain communicative needs. When the maxims are violated, the speech becomes indirect. And the use of the English euphemism is a kind of example.

5.2.1 Violation of Quantity Maxim

The Quantity Maxim requires that people should provide the right information for the need. While, as for some formations of English euphemism, the information it provides is often less than needed. For instance, “V.D.” for “venereal disease”, “p” for “piss”, and “G-man” for “garbage men”. These above euphemisms violate the Quantity Maxim but achieve the euphemistic effect.

5.2.2 Violation of Quality Maxim

This means the speaker provides false information or the information that lack adequate evidence. In communication, out of politeness and the purpose of being pleasant, people usually employ euphemisms to avoid saying something very completely, such as “soft in the head” for “a mad man”, and “a bit slow for his age” for “children of low intelligence”. In this way, euphemisms just only admit part of the facts and cover the seriousness.

5.2.3 Violation of Relation Maxim

The English euphemism usually adopts some words or expressions that are not related to the topic or show the topic indirectly. Of course, it violates the Relation Maxim based on the explicitness and directness. For example, “He sometimes takes others things without permission” for “He is a thief”.

5.2.4 Violation of Manner Maxim

The Manner Maxims requires being perspicuous, and specifically, while the euphemism conveys the information evasively and vaguely. Some euphemisms, such as “love child” for “irregular child”, are mainly for meeting the demands of courtesy or specific context. Therefore, when the taboos that refer to religion and social custom are involved, people will adopt euphemistic expressions according to the purpose of communication.

6. The English Euphemism and the Politeness Principle

Politeness has different definitions in different contexts. In essence, politeness is actually conducted when people notice each other's public image or are aware that each other's public image needs to be respected. And it is one of the important factors that cannot be ignored to fulfill the communicative effect. The famous British linguist, Leech thinks that politeness is the way to establish and maintain courtesy behavior. He suggests that politeness is involved on both sides of communication for self and other. In general, “self” is the speaker and “other” is the hearer. The Politeness Principle can be formed in two aspects: to maximize the expression of polite beliefs and minimize the expression of impolite beliefs. The maxims of Leech’s Politeness Principle tend to go in pairs as follows:

- (1) Tact Maxim
 - A) Minimize cost to other
 - B) Maximize benefit to other
- (2) Generosity Maxim
 - A) Minimize benefit to self
 - B) Maximize cost to self
- (3) Approbation Maxim
 - A) Minimize dispraise of other
 - B) Maximize praise of other
- (4) Modesty Maxim

- A) Minimize praise of self
 - B) Maximize dispraise of self
 - (5) Agreement Maxim
 - A) Minimize disagreement between self and other
 - B) Maximize agreement between self and other
 - (6) Sympathy Maxim
 - A) Minimize antipathy between self and other
 - B) Maximize sympathy between self and other [5]
- (Leech,1983:132)

From the above explanations of politeness, we can realize that though the examples in the last part violate the Cooperative Principle, they abide by the Politeness Principle. Politeness is one of the main motivations to use euphemism to avoid the offensive and disrespectful words to the listener. While the maxims of politeness should be observed in communication and they are euphemistic, such as “Would (could) you please...?” or “Would you mind...?”. They are all euphemistic expressions and show the politeness.

7. The English Euphemism and Indirect Speech Acts

7.1 Indirect Speech Acts

Austin, a British philosopher, firstly raised speech act theory. This theory is from the study of language function in human beings’ daily life. This is the first major theory in the study of language in use. Austin claimed that the unit of language communication was not the sentences themselves but a kind of speech act which people implement through the sentences they had used in daily communication [6]. (Austin, 2002) Speech acts can be analyzed on three levels: locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act.

Indirect speech act theory, raised by American linguist Searle, is the evolution of the speech act theory and becomes an important part in pragmatics. It means the speaker communicates to the hearer more than he actually says by way of relying on their mutually shared background information and context, both linguistic and non-linguistic, together with the general powers of rationality and inference on the part of the hearer. In other words, the speaker uses the literal meaning to convey his own meaning indirectly.

Indirect Speech Acts is usually used to express a request or a command. For example, when a person says “It is hot in this room”, if he just states a fact it is direct, but if his intention is to ask the hearer to open the window or turn the air-condition on it is indirect.

7.2 The relationship between the English Euphemism and Indirect Speech Acts

From the above analyses of Indirect Speech Acts, we can see the relationship between the English euphemism and it as follows:

First, the English euphemism and the Indirect Speech Acts all reflect the indirectness of language. For instance, the euphemism “we will have to let you go” shows that “you have been fired” indirectly and protects the employee’s face. While, the indirect speech act “the door is over there” obviously expresses an illocutionary act “leave the room”.

Second, even some euphemisms can be regarded as indirect speech act. It is universally acknowledged that one of the most important reasons to use indirect speech acts is to show the politeness to the listeners. Also, the use of the euphemism is to avoid taboos, embarrassments and to protect face and show politeness. Therefore, the euphemism is a form of Indirect Speech Acts. When using it people follow the indirect speech act theory. For example, “How about Lily’s singing? She

dances well.”, “Could you please open the window?” and “I am not accustomed to the dish”. They apply a euphemistic way to replace the awkward disagreements, requests, and objections. And they are both euphemisms and indirect speech acts.

However, the English euphemism and the Indirect Speech Acts are not actually the same. Euphemism can be a word, a phrase, a sentence, a discourse even a body language, such as “financially challenged, underprivileged and underdeveloped” for “poor”, which really are not indirect speech acts. Although they all show indirectness, the euphemism emphasizes the indirectness of expression and focus on the acceptability. The Indirect Speech Acts stress the indirectness to implement one speech act through another speech act indirectly and pay attention to the effect of speech. For example, “Can you pass me the salt?” is a requirement in a polite way.

In addition, the euphemism integrates the use of four language functions: conception, expression, communication and subtle features, and reflects the specific social and cultural psychology. While, the Indirect Speech Acts is just a linguistic theory.

8. Conclusions

Euphemism is a common linguistic as well as sociolinguistic phenomenon. It is the result of the influence of various social psychological factors and pragmatic factors. Also, it can reflect the feature of social development, social value, moral value and the nationality and commonality of culture. With the development of modern society, the euphemism has been an indispensable part of communication. What is more, it has a close link with pragmatics and the pragmatic function of euphemism has arose a wider concern of linguists from all over the world. In the process of communication, people always apply the pragmatics factors to the use of euphemism.

The specific cultural background and given context play an important role in understanding and using the English euphemism. And the analysis of euphemism cannot be separated from the context and the culture.

What is more, in communication, the pragmatic strategies should be taken into account for people to show politeness. And the use of euphemism is one of the effective techniques. In a word, to express the politeness and respect, the English euphemism is used by people, violating the Cooperative Principle but following the Politeness Principle, to show the real meaning indirectly.

At last but not least, as far as indirectness is concerned, there are lots of similarities between euphemism and indirect speech acts. They are all employed to express politeness. Indirect speech act is a necessary way to apply euphemism. However, the euphemism can be a word, a phrase, a sentence, a discourse or a body language. Indirect Speech Acts is just a kind of linguistic theory to study language. Thus, they are obviously different.

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