

# Semantic and Structural Differentiation of Euphemisms

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**Abstract:** The current article is devoted to the study of semantic and structural Differentiation of Euphemisms. It discusses the differences and similarities of euphemisms in the sphere of business, diseases and medicine. Euphemisms are used to replace social taboos, swearing, blasphemy, profanity and other offensive language, but they can be used just to make a common word sound more sophisticated. For indirect expressing, stylistic means like figures of speech can be used for expressing euphemisms.

Another subject mentioned in the paper is euphemistic strategies discussed from pragmatic point of view.

**Key words:** offensive, vague, phenomenon, euphemisms, conventional, association, connotation, social taboo, euphemisation, dysphemisms, pragmatic.

## Introduction

We utilize euphemisms in various spheres of life without thinking which euphemism to use and when, however, it is not so easy to classify them as there is no uniform standard. Euphemisms can be classified according to different criteria, rules, or principles. The following is a presentation of some possible classifications of euphemisms.

## Materials and methods

According to Enright, the word euphemism originates from Greek, where it means *to speak in a good way* (Enright, 2004). Firstly, euphemism was a softer term used as a substitution for taboo expressions only. Later, the use of euphemisms was enlarged for any vulgar, offensive, harsh, embarrassing, blunt or other indelicate term. The oldest social taboos that made people use euphemisms, occurred in areas exuding fear and respect such as religion or death. [6,45]

Definitions considering euphemisms do not differ very much. Euphemisms are described as more appropriate expressions used as a substitution to not preferred terms. According to Holder (Holder, 2008) euphemism is a vague or uncertain term, which is used to replace an unsuitable or impertinent expression. Horny (Horny, 2005) defines euphemisms as word or expressions that refer indirectly to some unsuitable, unpleasant or embarrassing issue in order to make it seem more acceptable.[8,14]

## Discussion and results

According to Rawson euphemisms are divided into two main types positive and negative which are distinguished according to the evaluative aspect (1981).

The positive euphemisms inflate and magnify, making the euphemized items seem altogether greater and more important than they are indeed. In order to avoid thrill, to be polite or to achieve cooperation, British and American people, especially modern Americans, give preference using the technique of exaggeration to euphemize something unpleasant and embarrassing. The positive euphemisms include majority interesting occupational titles, which save the egos of workers by elevating their job status. For example, 'exterminating engineers' is used for rat catchers while 'beauticians' stand for hairdressers. It might be said that quite a few positive euphemisms are doublespeak and cosmetic words. They usually appear in the political, military and commercial

vocabulary. Other kinds of positive euphemisms include personal honorifics such as the colonel, the honorable, the major, and many institutional euphemisms which convert madhouses into mental hospitals, colleges into universities, and small business establishments into emporiums, parlors, and salons. The desire to improve one's surroundings also is evident in geographical place names, most prominently in the case of the distinctly non green Greenland, but also in the designation of many small burghs as cities.

The negative euphemisms reduce and disappear. They are defensive in nature, offsetting the power of tabooed terms and otherwise eradicating from the language everything that people prefer not to refer directly. The negative euphemisms can be called traditional euphemisms or narrowing euphemism. They are really ancient, and dealt with the taboos. They relate to the same thing though they have different looks, the euphemism having a much more pleasant face than the taboo.

Euphemisms, whether positive or negative, can be also divided into unconscious euphemisms and conscious euphemisms. The criterion for classification is the euphemistic meaning whether correlative with the original meaning or not. Unconscious euphemisms, as its name implies, were developed long ago, and are used unconsciously, without any intent to deceive or evade. For example, now standard term as 'cemetery' has been a replacement for the more deathly 'graveyard' since the fourteenth century. 'Indisposition' has been a substitute for 'disease' for a long period; people seldom realize that its original meaning is incapacity for dealing with something. Take 'dieter' for another example, the original meaning taking food by a rule or regulation has been substituted by the euphemistic meaning 'the one moderate in eating and dining for losing weight'. From the above we can conclude that unconscious euphemisms were developed so long ago that few can remember their origin. Conscious euphemisms are widely used, which involves more complicated categories. When people talk to each other, speakers are conscious to say tactfully, and the listeners understand their implied meanings. For example, when a lady stands up and says that she wants to 'powder her nose' or 'make a phone call' at a dinner party, the people present realize the euphemism means 'something else', that is, 'going to the ladies' room'.

Besides the divisions mentioned above, euphemisms can be divided into six semantic categories:

### **1. Profession euphemisms:**

In western countries, mental work is considered to be the high job whereas physical labor is recognized as humble work, besides there is a great difference in the remuneration. Thus, most of the people hold that people with different occupations have different status in society. Some lowly paid or indecent jobs are often used in English culture just for saving face and expressing politeness. E. g. the word *agent* is commonly used for elevating the title of a job *press agent* which means publicist, or the euphemistic expression *exterminating engineer*, which refers to a rat catcher, *sanitation engineer* which stands for garbage collector, *hairstylist or beautician* for hairdresser or barber, *unwaged* for unemployed, *funeral director* for undertaker, *environmental hygienist* for janitors. There are some words in the English language which belong only to one sex now these words are substituted with euphemisms which don't belong to one sex eg: *spokesperson* for spokesman, *camera operator* for cameraman, *fire fighter* for fireman, *mail carrier* for postman, *executive or business woman* for businessman, *flight attendant* for stewardess, *chairperson* for chairman, *head teacher* for headmistress. As it is seen from the examples in the Uzbek and Russian languages there are not the words denoting job expressing only one sex.[7,56-58]

Holder claims that today's English is rich in terms suggesting loss of a job or unemployment, eg. *reduction in force, relieve, redundant, to reduce the headcount, to be selected out, to seek fresh challenges*. Language of Estate agents contains expressions concealing the negative sides of the house and supporting only the good points. Holder points out that the age of a house is commonly referred to without mentioning the actual year or period. *Georgian house, ante-bellum, ideal of modernization, period property* are often used in evasion of the proper data. [12,9-10]

### **2. Disease euphemisms:**

In the disease euphemisms, people always use *long illness* replaces for *cancer, social disease* replaces for *syphilis* and *AIDS*, also they use *lung trouble* stand for *tuberculosis* and so on. And if someone with a mental illness, we cannot say psychosis directly, we should say he or she is a little

confused, meanwhile, we should use *hard of hearing* in stand of *deaf*.

### 3. Death euphemisms:

In many societies, because death is feared, so people tend to avoid mentioning death directly and talk about it in a euphemistic way. They try to utilize more comfortable words to express the ideas. So death has a lot of soft, decent, and better-sounding names, such as *breathe one's last*, *fall asleep*, *go west*, *join the majority*, *lay down one's life*, *pass away*, *pay the debt of nature*, *reach a better world*, *to be at peace*, *to return to the dust*, or *he worked until he breathed his last*, *kick the bucket*, *sleep for ever* etc.

### 4. Sex euphemisms:

Euphemisms concerning sex: *the great divide*, *willing woman*, *gay boy*, *lost girl* can be used to replace *divorce*, *loose woman*, *male homosexual* and *prostitute*.

### 5. Crime euphemisms:

In the field of crime euphemism: *five-fingers*, *gentleman of the road*, *hero of the underground*, *the candy man* are often used to substitute for *pickpocket*, *robber*, *heroin*, and *drug pusher*.

### 6. Political euphemisms:

Since the function of euphemism can reduce the unpleasantness of a term or notion, it is natural that announcements of governments will often resort them to understate the facts, e.g. Student unrest *can be used to replace* student strike; police action, search and clear, war games *are used to substitute for* aggression, massacre and war exercise.

Besides semantic classification, a linguist Warren presents a classification which is based on both structural and semantic features of euphemisms (1992). By structural features Warren means types of word formation devices, phonemic modification, and borrowed words. The sub-categories of structural features of euphemisms with several examples are presented below following Warren's model.

### Euphemistic strategies from pragmatic point of view

The past twenty years have faced an increasing interest in pragmatics and it has been defined in a number of ways. According to Crystal, pragmatics is the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication (1997). Stalnaker tends to be briefer, in his words, pragmatics is the study of linguistic acts and the contexts in which they are performed. According to Yule, pragmatics is the study of speaker meaning: the focus is upon the interpretation of what people mean by their utterances rather than what the phrases in the utterances mean by themselves. Pragmatics also aims at investigating the invisible meaning: how what the unsaid is recognized to be a relevant part of a conversation. The proportion of what is said and unsaid is determined by a physical, social or conceptual distance. In this respect, pragmatics is the study of the expression of relative distance. Thus, his definition of pragmatics could be summarized in the following way: pragmatics is the study of speaker meaning, contextual meaning, the expression of relative distance, and the study of how more gets communicated than is said (Yule, 1996).

In pragmatics two types of context can be differentiated: linguistic context and physical context. Linguistic context, sometimes called co-text, is the set of words that surround the lexical item in question in the same phrase, or sentence. The physical context is the location of a given word, the situation in which it is used, as well as timing, all of which aid proper understating of the words. There are numerous frequently used words which depend on the physical context for their correct understanding, such as *there*, *that*, *it*, or *tomorrow*. Terms like that are known as deictic expressions. Depending on what such words refer to they can be classified as person deixis *him*, *they*, *you*; spatial deixis *there*, *here*; and temporal deixis *then*, *in an hour*, *tomorrow*. However, in pragmatics it is assumed that words do not refer to anything by themselves and it is people who in order to grasp the communicated idea perform an act of identifying what the speaker meant. This act is called reference

Another act involved in the analysis of discourse so as to make an association between what is said and what must be meant is inference and it is often used in connection with anaphora.

Anaphora is subsequent mentioning of a formerly introduced item, as in the following sentences: 'He went to a shop', 'It was closed'. When shop was mentioned for the second time the pronoun it was used to refer to it. Moreover, when people make use of such linguistic devices they necessarily make some assumptions about the knowledge of the speaker. Although some of the assumptions might be wrong, most of them are usually correct what makes the exchange of information smooth. What the producer of discourse correctly assumes to be known by the text's recipient is described as a presupposition.

In addition to that, pragmatics is also concerned with the tasks of utterances such as promising, requesting, informing which are referred to as speech acts. Certain grammatical structures are associated with corresponding functions, as in the interrogative structure 'Do you drink tea?' the function is questioning. Such a case can be described as a direct speech act. However, when the interrogative structure is used to fulfill a different purpose as in 'Can you close the window?' where it clearly is not a question about ability, but a polite request, such a situation is described as an indirect speech act. The use of both direct and indirect speech acts is strongly connected with the linguistic concept of politeness.

The main function of euphemism is making speech polite. Polite function of euphemism is to avoid inelegant things and make people feel pleasant. As Channell put it, "vagueness is used as one way of adhering to the politeness rules for a particular culture, and of not threatening face" (1994, 36). It means that in real life, when people meet with some unpleasant things or behaviors, they usually choose some vague expressions to avoid making bold or hurting other's feeling, i.e. they choose to use euphemism. When English-speakers refer to the appearance, they do not use the word 'ugly' or 'awful', which has strong derogatory sense. Instead, they use the word 'plain looking' or 'not pretty' the word fat is substituted with 'big boned' or 'plumb'[12,45] Westerners are sensitive to age. In their opinion, 'old' equals to 'useless' in some extent. In order not to hurt the feeling and self-esteem of the old, 'senior citizens' or 'seasoned men' replace 'old men'. Politeness plays an important role in human communication as it oils human relationships. It is viewed as one of the major social constraints on human interaction that regulates participants' communicative behavior by constantly reminding them to take into consideration the feelings of the others. It is necessary to consider their feelings so as to establish levels of mutual comfort and promote rapport, which in turn accelerate and facilitate human communication. The last aim of politeness is to make all of the parties relaxed and comfortable with one another. Euphemism and politeness are mutually dependent phenomena in the sense that the need to be polite determines euphemistic use in a considerable way. The indirectness provided by euphemism, in turn, contributes to avoid offence and insure politeness in its double dimension: *positive* oriented towards the public self-image and social prestige of the participants and *negative* (related to the interlocutor's freedom of action and freedom from imposition in the communicative encounter. Politeness is closely related to Face Theory, proposed by Goffman (1967). The notion of *face* is related to the self-image that the participants in the communicative context claim for themselves. In correlation with the double side of politeness, already mentioned, face is also two-dimensional: *positive face* identified with the individual's desire to be positively regarded in social context and *negative face* concerned with the participant's desire to be autonomous and free from imposition. Euphemism acts on each of these two dimensions of face: first, it responds to the speaker's need to soften potential social conflicts which may alter the interlocutor's prestige; second, it supposes a way to minimize a threat to the interlocutor's autonomy. Thus, face is so closely connected with euphemism that the latter has been defined by Allan and Burridge with reference to the concept of face as follows: "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" (1991, 11). Of course, there is in polite social interaction a wish to protect the interlocutor's face by minimizing the potential conflict of face threatening speech acts, which involves saving, at the same time, the speaker's own face. Politeness and face are so mutually dependent that there exists reflexivity between them: the need to conform to conventions of a socially adequate behaviour motivates euphemistic use which aims preserve the face of the participants in the communicative act.

In Pragmatics euphemisms perform a taboo function as well. Taboo is the main psychological

basis of the emergence of euphemism. Euphemism is the avoidance of the unpleasant, inelegant things. A famous sociolinguist Yuan once said: "Generally speaking, the coming into being of euphemism all begins from taboo". Euphemism has been used for a long time, and it is closely related to taboo. In fact, euphemism dates back to the language taboo in the early period of human civilization. When people try to avoid and give up taboo words, they have to find another word to replace this vacancy at the same time. There are some taboo things, such as birth, death, funeral, sex, nakedness, defecation, and urinate. If they are expressed directly, they are called taboo words and the feelings they give us are vulgar, crude and harsh, whereas if they are expressed indirectly, they are called euphemism, and the impressions they made on us are elegant, implicit and polite. The evading function of euphemism also works today. Some taboo notions cannot be easily removed from people's mind.

Another function could be called a covering up function as deliberately withholding information. What is so called 'cover up' means not giving information that the speaker possesses and which could be appropriate in the situation. Western political life gives birth to euphemism. Some politicians and news medias have made good use of the vagueness of euphemism to cover up the facts of some events for the purpose of making the politics, economy, and military more steady. People use 'depression' instead of 'economic crises' and the word 'striking' has been beautified as 'industrial action'. They are used to cover up the true nature of events, deceiving the public with nice-sounding and pseudo technical words.

Sometimes, people use euphemism to make their statement more persuasive. Thus the cosmetic words have a special communicative function, which is called inducing function. Euphemism has been widely applied in advertisement and sales promotion activities. Some airline companies divided the grades of passenger compartments into four ranks. They used 'deluxe' or 'premium class' to replace 'first class'. The 'second class' is transformed into 'first class' while the 'third class' is revised as 'business class' or 'tourist class'. They sound more pleasing. The rooms of hotel are also compartmentalized in the same way. They can be divided as first class, standard and private. Those words are sweet sounding and have nothing to do with customers' self-esteem. Also, 'antiques' is the substitution of 'second-hand furniture'. In the merchants' eye, the former will make the price higher. People often use 'compact car' to replace 'small car'. Though their meanings are the same, 'small' will be associated with an image of cheap and bad while 'compact' emphasizes the image of artistic, delicate, and terse. Those euphemisms desalinate the unpleasant feeling that the former concepts give us and intensify a feeling of more reliable and elegant. As a result, those products will be identified with the consumers and achieved the promotion goal. From the pragmatic view, the achieving of inducing function is caused by the glorification of the intrinsic meaning.

Finally, euphemisms also perform a tactical function. For example, on the plane, there are some bags that can be used by the passengers to shoot his cookies. People do not print the words 'vomit bag' on the surface of the bag. Instead, they use the words 'for motion discomfort'. The result proved that the vomit phenomenon has reduced because compared with the former words, the words 'for motion discomfort' prevents the passengers from vomiting when in a state of airsickness. This is the tactical function of euphemism.

## Conclusion

As it can be inferred from the article euphemisms are indirect expressions, the apprehension of a meaning can be difficult. Once a euphemism becomes known and starts to be used frequently in association with a sensitive or an unsuitable subject, negative connotations cause pejoration of a euphemism, which means the loss of indirect and therefore polite value of the euphemism so, there are five pragmatic functions of euphemisms, namely politeness, taboo, covering up, inducing, and tactical, which show a wide application of euphemisms in various contexts <http://www.englishthesis.cn/>.

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