Analysis of Pragmatic Functions of Euphemisms ——from the Perspective of Pragmatic Principles

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Abstract. As an important means to coordinate interpersonal relationships, euphemisms are often used to express speaker's thoughts in an indirect and tortuous way. By applying euphemisms in a appropriate manner, we can achieve the effect of beautification, politeness, avoiding taboos, and many others. Based on their powerful pragmatic functions, this paper will focus on the conversational implicature of euphemisms from the perspective of pragmatic principles, highlight their communicative effects by analyzing some examples in our daily life, and point out the significance in a broader perspective of cross-cultural communication so as to reduce pragmatic failure.

Keywords: Euphemisms, Cooperative Principle, Politeness Principle, Pragmatic Functions.

1. Introduction

In our interaction with others, we should be conscious that our language expression conform to language rules, and in the meantime, ensure the appropriateness of expression. Euphemism, as an important means to lubricate and beautify our words, thus play a very important role in our daily life. In recent years, there are many papers focusing on euphemisms both at home and abroad, but these studies are limited to rhetoric, semantics and lexicography in general. Compared with those fields, not much research has been done on the pragmatic functions of euphemisms from the perspective of pragmatic principles. This paper, therefore, based on such pragmatic principles as the Cooperative Principle (CP) and the Politeness Principle (PP), tries to analyze the conversational implicature of euphemisms so as to show their powerful pragmatic functions and get some enlightenment on how to use euphemisms correctly in our daily life and also in the cross-cultural communication.

2. Overview of Euphemisms and Pragmatic Principles

2.1. Euphemisms

From the perspective of its history and origin, euphemism is closely related to religion and taboos. It originates from people's reverence for God and fear of evil, as people think that calling their names directly will cause trouble and bring bad luck. Therefore, in order to come up with some indirect words or sign symbols to replace some supreme thing, the earliest use of euphemism was born. Etymologically, the prefix "eu-" means "good" and the stem "phemism" refers to "speech", thus the literal meaning of the word "euphemism" is "word of good omen" or "say something good in a pleasant way". Generally, it can be concluded that any use of implicit, roundabout or pleasant words to express taboos or sensitive things is among euphemisms. However, we should notice that the use of euphemisms varies in different cultural and social backgrounds. Also, euphemisms change with their connotations. Once the previous euphemism is attached with kind of negative meaning, people will use new euphemism to replace it. Therefore, euphemisms are constantly enriched and developed.

2.2. Cooperative Principle and Politeness Principle

In 1960s, the American philosopher H. P. Grice proposed the theory of Cooperative Principle (CP), which is one of the major theories in pragmatics. According to Grice, in all linguistic communication activities, in order to communicate with each other successfully, there exists a tacit agreement between the speaker and the listener, a principle that both parties should follow, i.e., each

communicator is required to speak throughout the conversation in accordance with the purpose and direction of the conversation. It is clear that the mutually accepted direction serves as the basis for an effective conversation. Accordingly, people in communication are required to strictly adhere to the CP, so that the conversation can proceed smoothly. In brief, this principle illustrates "what participants have to do in order to conduct communication in a maximally efficient, rational and cooperative way." [1]

In pragmatic principles, the Cooperative Principle (CP) explains the conversational implicature produced by people's indirect and circuitous use of language, but it does not explain why people violate the Cooperative Principle. Later, in view of this, the famous British scholar G. Leech elaborated on the important role of politeness to linguistic communication in his book *Principles of Pragmatics*. In this sense, the Politeness Principle (PP) supplements the Cooperative Principle to some extent. In his book, Leech holds the view that, in our daily conversation, people violating the Cooperative Principle are driven by the motivation of politeness. And the Politeness Principle has two core aspects, maximizing polite expression and minimizing impolite expression.

By discussing the two pragmatic principles, we may get to know why people in conversation do not always abide by CP. In many cases, they beat around the bush and not express their meaning directly so as to achieve a more desirable effect. Hence, it is clear that both of the two theories are useful to explain the motivations of people's communicative behavior.

3. Pragmatic Analysis of Euphemisms Based on the Pragmatic Principles

3.1. Euphemisms Violating the Cooperative Principle

Cooperative principle are used to explain that language users usually convey more meanings than they say in conversation. However, it is precisely because cooperative principle is always at work and ready to help speakers communicate, so the dialogue between people can be carried out effectively and smoothly[2]. As is discussed above, the Cooperative Principle (CP) is the principle that people must abide by in a successful conversation. However, in our daily conversation, Grice noticed that people do not always speak directly, but have the tendency to imply them. That is, by saying something in an indirect and roundabout way, euphemisms are thus generated. Therefore, by analyzing the conversational implicature caused by the deviation of euphemisms from the perspective of Cooperative Principle, the pragmatic functions and communicative effects of euphemisms can thus be highlighted.

3.1.1 The violation of the maxim of quantity

The maxim of quantity requires that the information we provide needs to be no more and no less on the premise of satisfying the information needed in the conversation. However, the use of some euphemisms violates this criterion. For example, in many diplomatic occasions, economic, political, or military issues between countries are often involved, while some matters involving state secrets are not allow disclosing to the outside world. In this case, in order to achieve the purpose of obscuring confidential topics, diplomats will use vague words to expand the scope of information covered. Hence, what we should pay attention to is that since euphemisms do not clearly state certain facts, that is, they roughly conceal certain important facts so as to achieve the purpose of diluting differences and contradictions. Hence, the consequence may turn out to be the misjudge of the truth of diplomatic language, or lack a sufficient understanding of existing crisis[3].

Example :

In the last two days, Chairman and Premier and Vice-premier separately met with Dr. Brzezinski and had frank and serious conversations with him on international issues of common interest and on the question of Sino-U.S. relations…[4]

The expressions such as "serious conversations" and "international issues" in this example are manifestations of violations of the maxim of quantity, that is, the amount of information provided is less than required. For example, the speaker uses expressions like"serious conversations" to

downplay the seriousness of the matter by providing insufficient information. However, the truth may be that there may be quiet serious disagreement between the two countries. Under such a diplomatic occasion, this vagueness of expressions not only avoid the embarrassing situation caused by directly mentioning the confrontation between the two sides, but also alleviate some tensions between the two.

3.1.2 The violation of the maxim of quality

The maxim of quality requires people not to say things that he knows to be false or lack evidence. In verbal communication, theoretically speaking, one should speak freely, but in reality, the communication process is not in a vacuum and often cannot be separated from social and humanistic elements such as the historical stage, cultural background, and communication history between communicators to make language choices[5]. Hence, there are two kinds of situations that exist in people's daily interactions regarding such. Either they belong to understatement of original flaws and deficiencies, or they make the real situation appear more decent by exaggerating the factual ones. Therefore, if the listener wants to know the real intention of the speaker, he or she must use the context to infer the conversational meaning.

Regarding those cases, there are lots of euphemisms about different professions. However, there exits a long-standing prejudice against certain professions. Hence, for the purpose of improving the social status of these workers, some euphemisms related to professions have thus evolved. For example, "salesman" is called "customer's representative", "gardener" is replaced by "landscape architect", and "garage collector" gets a name of "sanitation engineer", etc. And the reason for using such euphemisms is to make these relatively low status jobs sound dignified and respectable, and not to embarrass the others.

3.1.3 The violation of the maxim of relation

The maxim of relation requires what the speaker and the listener talk about should be related to the context, and the words should be appropriate. As we know, on different occasions, we may use different linguistic terms to convey more or less the same meaning, and the use of euphemisms is exactly an indication of this. When talking about taboo topics such as birth, oldness, illness, death and sex, in order to avoid embarrassment and vulgarity, speakers will tend to choose a vague and obscure way to express their thoughts. For example, if you want to say that a person is "pregnant", you can use the following euphemisms, "be in a delicate", "cancel social condition", or "be expecting" and so on. In addition, there are cases when someone talks about other's privacy or comment on other's personality defects in public, the listener will often deliberately violate this principle so as to divert the topic.

3.1.4 The violation of the maxim of manner

The violation of the manner maxim refers to the speaker uses ambiguous words or vague words to express his ideas. In the same way, the application of euphemisms includes using evasive expressions to avoid talking directly about something embarrassing or unpleasant. Therefore, euphemisms are always associated with indirectness and vagueness. Wu Tieping once analyzed the relationship between euphemisms and language vagueness in his book *Fuzzy Linguistics*, which emphasized the basic status of vagueness in euphemisms[6].

Example:

(This is a dialogue in a movie.)

After the two assassins prepared the scene of the premeditated murder, they started chatting.

Max: "Have you been to a movie?"

George: "Occasionally."

Max: "You should read more. Movies can be good for a clever boy like you."

In this dialogue, Max violated the maxim of manner. From the superficial level, he persuaded George to watch more movies. However, what he wants to imply is that there are many assassination shots in the movie, so that he can learn more killing skills from it. Imagine that if the speaker utters his intentions directly, their identities may be immediately exposed. Therefore, Max concealed his

intentions with indirect and vague expressions, leaving the listener for speculation.

As discussed above, the Cooperative Principle (CP) enables speakers to convey more than is literally said. To some extent, using euphemisms is to use language strategically, which is also closely linked with different social cultures. Hence, when interacting with people from different culture, we should take our listeners' cultural background into consideration to reduce pragmatic failure. However, the Cooperative Principle doesn't explain why people express their thoughts indirectly or imply their intentions. The Politeness Principle, which will be analyzed in the following part, is the other important reason that people choose to use euphemisms.

3.2. Euphemisms Observing the Politeness Principle

As an effective means to achieve a pleasant communication, the great significance of politeness cannot be ignored. G. Leech believes that it is out of the consideration of the Politeness Principle that speakers will deliberately violate the Cooperative Principle and express their thoughts implicitly and indirectly. In our daily communication, there will always be occasions when we cannot say things without concealment as it may cause unpleasantness or embarrassment, or involve words that are taboos. At this time, in order to achieve our communicational goal, people often violate the CP for the consideration of observing politeness and maintaining a pleasant atmosphere. Hence, for a better communication effect, speakers are also restricted by the Politeness Principle at the same time. In most cases, we can say that willing to cooperate is a sign of politeness. But sometimes, violating some of the principles is also for the purpose of politeness.

In our interaction with others, although what we say may be true, the listeners may still feel offended. Hence,in view of the powerful pragmatic functions of euphemisms , we turn to use such expressions to beautify our language. For example, "blind" is replaced by "visually impaired", the "deaf" is called "slow hearing", and the "ugly" is substituted by "ordinary" and so on. We may find however different expressions they may be, the motivation that drives people to use euphemisms is the same, that is, politeness.

(1) The tact maxim is the most fundamental principle in the Politeness Principle, which refers to trying not to talk about views that are harmful to the interests of others. As it emphasizes the interests of others as well as amplifies the significance of politeness, this maxim is the most widely used way of showing one's politeness.

Example:

A:"Oh, am I too fat?"

B:"That's not true, my dear. You just need to pay a little attention to your weight."

In this conversation, by avoiding telling the embarrassing facts directly, Speaker B concealed the defect that Speaker A is actually a bit of obese. On the other hand, it will not make A feel offended at the same time.

(2) The generosity maxim focuses much more on the speaker, which embodies putting the other person in a higher position and putting ourselves in a lower position. That is, let the other one benefit as much as possible.

Example:

A:"Thanks to your presence, otherwise we will definitely mess up this meeting."

B:"It's the credit of everyone. Without the active cooperation of everyone, I would not be able to handle such a situation alone."

In this example, Speaker A fully praised Speaker B, but B did not attribute all the honor to himself, saying that it was the credit of everyone. By following the generosity maxim, speaker B's goal of minimizing self-benefit was achieved.

(3) The approbation maxim is reflected in trying to talking less about the other party's shortcomings, but to praise the other party more. This principle is mainly related to the listener and is applied in the description words mostly. For example, if a woman looks like "skinny", we tend to use "slim" or "slender" to describe her, "plump" instead of "fat", and so on. In addition, when it comes to the death of great man such as Marx, we usually adopt the words such as "ceased to think"

and “gone to sleep – but forever”, which reflects our high respect for such great man.

(4) The modesty maxim emphasizes that the speaker should fully consider the feelings of the listener from his point of view. In order to follow this principle, the speaker will deliberately belittle himself to show his humility and respect for the other party. China is the country that has the most applications in this regard, and there are different expressions to show respect for others. Although it is not so common in English culture, there are still some related expressions. For example, people use“your humble servant” to describe themselves, and “your majesty” to represent the other side.

(5) The agreement maxim means to minimize the disagreement when people have different opinions. Driven by this maxim, the speaker will use a periphrastic way to maximize the agreement with the other party.

Example:

A:“How about my new dress?”

B:“Well, I don’t have an eye for beauty.”

In this dialogue, instead of making a negative comment on Speaker A’s new skirt, Speaker B stated his opinion in a roundabout way. It is through this strategy that the speaker’s inconsistency with the hearer is reduced, and the other party’s face is also saved at the same time.

(6) The sympathy maxim requires people to minimize their aversion to others and maximize their sympathy for others. To put it in another way, when the other party is in a weak position, we tend to show our sympathy for the other party so as to achieve a better communication effect.

Example:

A:“My grandma hurt his leg yesterday.”

B:“I’m sorry to hear that.”

In this conversation, Speaker B showed his sincere concern for A’s grandma. Through the way of expressing sympathy for the other side, it not only makes Speaker A feel Speaker B’s sincerity, but also narrows the psychological distance between the two persons.

From the above examples, it can be concluded that the polite use of euphemisms not only saves the face of people involved, but also creates a good communication atmosphere, which is conducive to the realization of the speaker’s communicative purpose. It is in consideration of the Politeness Principle that people often express their feelings implicitly, and the principle also explains the reason why people deliberately violate the Cooperative Principle. In view of this, the study of the Politeness Principle is beneficial for us to understand the motivation of using euphemisms, and also conducive to improving the intercultural communicative competence of English learners and users from different cultural backgrounds.

4. Conclusion

In order to keep a harmonious interpersonal relationship and achieve a successful communication, we can find that euphemisms exist everywhere and they are used for different purposes. It is concluded that in order to communicate with each other successfully, people often violate the CP and observe the PP by using euphemisms.This paper, therefore, makes an attempt to explore the pragmatic functions of euphemisms from the pragmatic principles such as the Cooperative Principle (CP) and the Politeness Principle (PP), so as to get a better understanding of the motivation by using euphemisms and thus highlight their powerful pragmatic functions. Moreover, it should be noted that as a linguistic phenomenon, euphemisms also belong to social and cultural phenomenon, which permeates people’s daily life. Hence, the study of euphemisms from the pragmatic principles is not only of great significance to our art of speaking, but also beneficial to get some enlightenment on how to use euphemisms correctly in our daily life and in a broader sense of cross-cultural communication.

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