

Pragmatic Analysis of Euphemisms in *Downton Abbey* from the Perspective of Adaptation Theory

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Abstract: This paper examines the use of euphemisms in the British television series *Downton Abbey* through the lens of Adaptation Theory, as proposed by Jef Verschueren. Euphemisms, as linguistic strategies, are employed to mitigate face-threatening acts, maintain social harmony, and adhere to politeness norms in discourse. *Downton Abbey*, set in early 20th-century England, provides a rich context for analyzing how characters adapt their language to societal expectations, power dynamics, and emotional constraints. By applying Adaptation Theory—which emphasizes language users’ ability to make linguistic choices based on communicative needs and contextual correlates—this study explores how euphemisms in the series serve as adaptive mechanisms to navigate social hierarchies, emotional delicacy, and cultural norms. The analysis reveals that euphemisms in *Downton Abbey* are not merely decorative but essential tools for character interaction, reflecting the rigid class structures and evolving social mores of the era. This paper contributes to the understanding of euphemisms as dynamic pragmatic devices and highlights the relevance of Adaptation Theory in media discourse analysis.

Keywords: Adaptation Theory, Euphemisms, *Downton Abbey*, Pragmatics, Politeness, Social Hierarchy.

1. Introduction

Euphemisms are pervasive in language, serving as softeners for topics considered taboo, offensive, or socially sensitive.^[1] In period dramas like *Downton Abbey*, euphemisms are particularly prominent, reflecting the restrained communication norms of early 20th-century British aristocracy. *Downton Abbey*, created by Julian Fellowes, depicts the lives of the Crawley family and their servants, offering a nuanced portrayal of social interactions shaped by class, gender, and tradition. This paper analyzes euphemisms in the series through Verschueren’s Adaptation Theory, which posits that language use involves continuous adaptation to contextual factors. By examining how characters employ euphemisms to adapt to social, psychological, and physical realities, this study sheds light on the pragmatic functions of euphemisms in maintaining decorum and managing interpersonal relationships. The study of euphemisms sits at the intersection of pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and discourse analysis. Traditionally, euphemisms have been defined as mild or indirect expressions substituted for ones considered too harsh, blunt, or socially unacceptable (Allan & Burridge, 2006). Research has primarily focused on their taxonomic classification (e.g., orthophemisms, dysphemisms), their thematic domains (death, sex, bodily functions, social shortcomings), and their sociolinguistic functions of politeness and face-work, heavily drawing on Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory. Politeness theory explains euphemisms as strategic linguistic choices to mitigate Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs), protecting either the speaker’s positive face (desire for approval) or the hearer’s negative face (desire for autonomy).

2. Theoretical Framework: Adaptation Theory

Jef Verschueren’s Adaptation Theory, introduced in *Understanding Pragmatics* (1999), argues that language use is a process of making choices driven by the need to adapt

to communicative contexts. These choices occur at various levels, including phonological, syntactic, and lexical, and are influenced by contextual correlates such as social norms, power relations, and emotional states. Adaptation Theory emphasizes the dynamic interplay between linguistic choices and contextual factors, providing a framework for analyzing how speakers negotiate meaning and social dynamics. In the context of *Downton Abbey*, euphemisms represent strategic linguistic choices that allow characters to adapt to the rigid social hierarchy, emotional constraints, and cultural expectations of their environment. However, while politeness theory offers a robust framework for understanding the why of euphemisms in dyadic interactions, it can be somewhat static when applied to the complex, multi-layered, and historically specific social ecosystem of *Downton Abbey*. The theory often presupposes a relatively equal capacity for face-work, whereas the series showcases a world of inherent and institutionalized power asymmetry.^[2] Here, Verschueren’s (1999) Adaptation Theory provides a more dynamic and encompassing framework. It moves beyond the mere mitigation of FTAs to conceptualize language use as a continuous process of making negotiable choices from a variable range of possibilities to meet specific communicative needs within a given context. These choices are made in relation to contextual correlates, which Verschueren categorizes into the physical world, the social world, and the mental world.

2.1. Euphemisms in *Downton Abbey*: Context and Functions

Downton Abbey is set in a time of social transition, where Victorian propriety clashes with modernist influences. Euphemisms in the series serve multiple adaptive functions.

Social Hierarchy and Power Dynamics: Characters use euphemisms to reinforce or challenge class distinctions.^[3] For instance, servants often employ indirect language when addressing aristocrats to show deference, while the aristocracy uses euphemisms to discuss “unsavory” topics like financial decline or scandal.

Politeness and Face-Saving: Euphemisms mitigate face-threatening acts, such as criticism or refusal. For example, phrases like “I’m afraid that won’t be possible” soften refusals, preserving social harmony.

Emotional and Psychological Adaptation: Characters adapt language to cope with trauma or emotional distress, such as using euphemisms for death (“passed away”) or illness (“under the weather”).

Cultural and Historical Adaptation: The series reflects historical norms, such as euphemisms for pregnancy (“in a delicate condition”) or romantic relationships (“courting”), highlighting how language adapts to cultural taboos.

2.2. Analysis of Key Scenes

This section analyzes selected scenes from *Downton Abbey* to illustrate how euphemisms function as adaptive tools. For example:

a. In Season 1, Lady Mary Crawley uses euphemisms to discuss her compromised reputation after the death of Mr. Pamuk, adapting to the need for discretion in a scandal-prone society.

b. The butler, Mr. Carson, employs euphemisms when addressing the family, exemplifying how servants adapt their language to show respect and maintain their positions.

c. Dialogue around World War I casualties relies on euphemisms to convey grief while adhering to societal expectations of stoicism.

These examples demonstrate how euphemisms enable characters to navigate complex social landscapes, balancing personal expression with communal norms.

2.3. Adaptation Theory and Euphemisms: A Synthesis

Applying Adaptation Theory to euphemisms in *Downton Abbey* reveals that linguistic choices are not arbitrary but are strategically aligned with contextual demands. Characters adapt their language to achieve communicative goals, whether to uphold tradition, manage conflict, or express empathy. This adaptability underscores the pragmatic richness of euphemisms, which serve as buffers against social friction and instruments of cultural preservation.[4] Moreover, the series highlights how euphemisms evolve in response to changing contexts, such as the post-war shift toward more direct communication. In *Downton Abbey*, the social world—particularly the rigid Edwardian class hierarchy, prescribed gender roles, and strict codes of conduct—is the most salient correlate shaping linguistic adaptation. The mental world, encompassing the characters’ emotions, intentions, and psychological states, constantly interacts with and is constrained by these social norms. For instance, a servant’s fear (mental world) must be expressed through deferential language (adaptation) to conform to class etiquette (social world). Adaptation Theory, therefore, allows us to see euphemisms not merely as polite substitutions but as active, strategic adaptations to a constraining environment. This study builds upon the established work on euphemisms and politeness but argues that Adaptation Theory offers a superior lens for analyzing their usage in a highly stratified dramatic setting like *Downton Abbey*, where language is a primary tool for navigating, reinforcing, and occasionally subverting the

social order.

Upward Adaptation (Servants to Aristocracy): Servants’ language is a masterclass in adaptive self-censorship. They rarely make direct requests or statements. For example, a footman wanting to convey a message might say, “I was wondering if I might trouble you to inform Her Ladyship...” instead of “Tell Lady Grantham.” This euphemistic framing adapts to the social world by transforming a potential imposition (an FTA against the aristocrat’s negative face) into a self-deprecating inquiry, reinforcing the power differential. Similarly, bad news is heavily cushioned. When Mr. Carson must inform Lord Grantham of a potentially scandalous situation involving a servant, he begins, “My lord, a rather delicate matter has come to my attention...” The euphemism “delicate matter” adapts to the social norm that forbids blunt, troubling discourse from a servant to his master, while also preparing the hearer for unpleasantness. [5]

3. Implications and Conclusion

This analysis demonstrates that euphemisms in *Downton Abbey* are integral to character development and social commentary. Through the lens of Adaptation Theory, euphemisms emerge as dynamic tools for negotiating identity, power, and emotion in a stratified society. The study contributes to pragmatics by linking euphemistic language to broader adaptive processes and offers insights into the historical sociolinguistics of early 20th-century Britain. Future research could explore euphemisms in other period dramas or compare adaptive strategies across cultures. In conclusion, *Downton Abbey* not only entertains but also provides a fertile ground for examining how language adapts to and shapes human interaction. This study employs a qualitative pragmatic analysis of selected dialogue from *Downton Abbey*. The data is drawn from key scenes across all six seasons of the series, chosen for their illustrative power in demonstrating euphemistic adaptation related to core themes: class relations, financial and social decline, romantic and sexual matters, illness and death, and war. The analysis is textual and discourse-based, focusing on the interplay between the linguistic form of the euphemism, the characters involved (their social status, gender, relationship), and the immediate situational context.

Euphemism is an indispensable and dynamic component of the English language. It operates at the intersection of linguistics, psychology, and sociology, serving fundamental human needs for social harmony, self-protection, and conceptual management of the unpleasant. While they facilitate polite interaction, euphemisms can also obscure truth and manipulate thought, highlighting the dual nature of language as both a social lubricant and a potential instrument of obfuscation. The continuous cycle of euphemism creation and decay vividly illustrates changing societal attitudes, making the study of euphemism crucial for understanding not only language itself but also the culture that shapes and is shaped by it.

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