

A Pragmatic Study of Euphemisms

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Abstract: There are significant differences between Chinese and Western cultures, particularly in terms of communication styles. Westerners tend to be more direct in their way of speaking, often expressing their intentions in a straightforward manner. In contrast, Chinese people, influenced by their traditional culture, tend to speak in a more indirect and roundabout way. They are accustomed to expressing their ideas and purposes in a euphemistic manner. Chinese speakers typically begin with a prelude, using indirect language to convey their true intentions. They then gradually transition to the main topic, unraveling the mystery step by step. This roundabout way of speaking is why euphemisms are commonly used in Chinese communication. The use of euphemisms is preferred by people from various backgrounds for several reasons. Euphemisms allow individuals to avoid the bluntness of direct expression, creating a more comforting atmosphere for communication. They also take into consideration the feelings and emotions of the listener, maintaining the dignity of all parties involved in the conversation. Furthermore, the use of euphemisms contributes to enhancing the quality and efficiency of communication. By exploring the pragmatic function of euphemisms, individuals can gain a deeper understanding of the underlying meanings behind the words. This understanding allows for the mastery of appropriate communication skills and facilitates effective communication. In this article, the author will analyze the pragmatic meaning of euphemisms from three perspectives: the avoidance function, the politeness function, and the concealment function. This analysis will be supplemented with specific cases to reveal the pragmatic significance of euphemisms and enhance the readers' comprehension of their usage.

Keywords: Euphemism; Pragmatic Meaning; Avoidance Function; Politeness Function; Concealment Function.

1. Introduction

Euphemism, a widely used form of language in communication, encompasses both sociolinguistic and cultural dimensions (Feng, 2015). Ren (2012) identifies four cultural dimensions that contribute to the origin of euphemisms: reverence for heaven and nature, adherence to feudal codes of ethics, the Confucian Doctrine of the Mean, and the Western concept of equality. In essence, euphemisms reflect the psychological foundation and thinking patterns of individuals worldwide. It is evident that euphemisms emerge as a response to social needs, allowing speakers to express their thoughts gracefully while considering the sensitivities of their listeners. According to Enright (1985), "if the world had no euphemisms, the world would stop running because of friction and contradiction, and people would be full of enmity". Sun (2007) asserts that Enright's statement highlights the significant role of euphemisms in everyday communication. Euphemisms can be considered the "lubricant" of communication activities, as they minimize and eliminate potential unpleasantness, enabling effective communication between parties. In the study of language activities, it is crucial to clarify the concept of euphemism, understand its pragmatic functions, and explore how these functions facilitate communication.

The word "euphemism" originates from Greece and translates to "good words". Sun (2007) identifies two categories of euphemism: traditional euphemism and stylistic euphemism. Traditional euphemism is closely associated with taboo language, addressing sensitive topics such as life, death, disease, age, and sex. Stylistic euphemism, on the other hand, serves the purpose of complimenting others and maintaining their dignity or creating a pleasant atmosphere. Both traditional euphemism and stylistic euphemism exert a

substantial influence on human interaction and communication. Traditional euphemisms help navigate potentially uncomfortable subjects, preserving individuals' emotional well-being. Stylistic euphemisms, through their positive and complimentary nature, contribute to establishing pleasant interactions between speakers. As crucial branches of euphemisms, traditional euphemism and stylistic euphemism greatly influence how people interact and communicate, ultimately fostering harmonious relationships within society. Understanding the definition and pragmatic functions of euphemisms is essential for promoting effective and respectful communication, thus contributing to a more harmonious society.

Euphemism is a delicate form of expression that facilitates effective communication and puts both parties at ease during dialogue. While the definition given by Baidu browser lacks a comprehensive explanation of euphemism's role and function, further insight can be gained by referring to the Dictionary. According to Dictionary, euphemism is a rhetorical pattern that indirectly conveys the intended meaning by utilizing subtle words to accentuate the implication. This definition highlights one of the distinctive features of euphemism, which is a "subtle and roundabout" manner of speaking. In a compilation of ancient Chinese rhetoric, Ji (1986) offers a broad definition of euphemism. Ji describes euphemism as the adoption of implicit expression within a particular language background, where there is a desire to avoid strong emotional reactions or negative impacts on language expression and communication. The rhetorical technique of euphemism is utilized to mitigate negative effects. Ji systematically and comprehensively explains the reasons behind the use of euphemism, the mechanism by which it functions, as well as its purpose and effectiveness. In this article, the author will draw upon Ji's explanation as a

valuable resource for further exploration of this topic.

As Ren (2012) observes, euphemisms reflect and embody the cultural psychology of a nation, representing recognized code of conduct, social customs, thinking patterns, aesthetic sensibilities, values and moral standards from different perspectives. As mentioned above, euphemisms serve as a “lubricant” for harmonizing interpersonal and social relationships. Correct use of euphemisms not only helps create a comfortable communication environment, avoiding language that may provoke strong emotions in the other party, but also promotes effective communication. Scholars have offered different explanations for categorizing the pragmatic functions of euphemisms. According to Li (2006), English euphemisms are complex and diverse, and their pragmatic functions can be broadly classified into five major aspects, namely, avoidance function, vulgarity avoidance function, politeness function, concealment function, and humor function. Meanwhile, Wang and Wu (1994), in their book *Language and Culture*, summarize the pragmatic functions of euphemisms into three major categories: avoidance function, the concealment function, and the politeness function. The author considers Wang and Wu’s classification of euphemisms to be concise and more aligned with the practical use of euphemisms. Therefore, this article will rely on Wang and Wu’s categorization of the pragmatic functions of euphemisms for a comprehensive explanation.

2. Three Pragmatic Functions of Euphemisms

2.1. Avoidance Function

The primary communicative function of euphemisms is to avoid direct or harsh expression, and this can be closely linked to humans’ psychological inclination to revere nature. According to Neaman (1991), the motives behind creating euphemisms are as diverse and universal as any other human emotion. They originate from a sense of awe and the desire to appease the mysterious forces believed to govern the universe. While Neaman’s conclusion on the causes of euphemisms is accurate, it can be broadened to encompass the ancient human awe and fear of deities. In ancient times, lacking scientific knowledge, people ascribed inexplicable phenomena to the influence of divine beings. This led to the practice of “heaven-human induction”, where natural occurrences were thought to be divine calls, and a constant pursuit of achieving unity between heaven and humankind. The concept of “heaven-human induction” has had a considerable influence, shaping human interpretations of natural disasters as divine retribution for perceived transgressions. Over time, this perception has instilled a deep-seated fear within individuals, giving rise to language taboos. Consequently, when faced with topics that are considered sensitive or forbidden, people have recourse to employ euphemisms as a means of avoiding direct discussion. As a result, the usage of euphemisms has become widespread. Li (2009) asserts that linguistic taboos and euphemisms are intrinsically intertwined components of any culture or society. In contemporary times, the utilization of euphemisms to circumvent taboo language on certain occasions is not only deemed acceptable but also indicative of social progress and refinement. To illustrate the practicality of euphemisms’ avoidance function, a case study will be presented.

Xifeng Wang: “Well,” she cried with a laugh, “this is the first time I’ve set eyes on such a ravishing beauty. Her whole air is so distinguished! She doesn’t take after her father, son-

in-law of our Old Ancestress, but looks more like a Jia. No wonder our Old Ancestress couldn’t put you out of her mind and was for ever talking or thinking about you. But poor ill-fated little cousin, losing your mother so young!” With that she dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief.

Lady Jia: “I’ve only just dried my tears. Do you want to start me off again?” said the old lady playfully. “Your young cousin’s had a long journey and she’s delicate. We’ve just got her to stop crying. So don’t reopen that subject.” (Yang&Dai 1978)

The above case is excerpted from the conversation between Xifeng Wang and Lady Jia in the third chapter of *A Dream of Red Mansions*. Considering that Lin Daiyu fell into a state of great grief due to her mother’s death, Lin Ruhai feared that he could not take good care of her daughter Daiyu, so he sends her to her grandmother’s house, hoping that Daiyu can come out from the shadows in a crowded and happy atmosphere. Since Daiyu’s mother was favored by Lady Jia, taking Daiyu to her grandmother’s home is an appropriate choice, which not only relieves Daiyu’s pain from losing her mother but also reduces Lady Jia’s sorrow from losing a daughter. Lady Jia and Daiyu feel close to each other the moment they meet, which is probably a result of the blood relationship that connects them. Lady Jia even bursts into tears because she is overwhelmed by her emotions. It is the first time that Daiyu has met Xifeng Wang and the other cousins in this big family. Owing to the fact that they do not know each other well, they are careful in their speech, especially when it comes to sensitive topics. For example, when Xifeng Wang expresses her concern for Daiyu by mentioning the death of her mother, she adopts a roundabout way by speaking of how Daiyu has “lost” her mother, instead of a way of direct speaking.

Throughout history, death has remained humankind’s most profound fear, leading individuals to shroud it in secrecy. Consequently, death has emerged as a linguistic taboo, the most avoided topic in human discourse. In this specific context, Xifeng Wang, upon meeting Daiyu for the first time, employs the euphemistic term “lose” when referring to the death of Daiyu’s mother instead of directly mentioning it. This choice of euphemism exemplifies the deep-seated psychological state of individuals who are reluctant to acknowledge and accept the reality of losing their loved ones to death. The prevailing belief suggests that death marks the departure of the physical body from the world, while the soul is thought to linger on. Embracing this belief, individuals attempt to convince themselves that they are still psychologically accompanied by the departed individual. Although this belief is not grounded in reality, it serves as a form of self-deception that can be effective in facilitating mental recovery to a certain extent. Employing euphemisms serves as a psychological solace, allowing individuals to alleviate their painful emotions and temporarily emerge from the depths of despair, ultimately leading to healing. It becomes evident that the use of euphemisms as substitutes for direct expressions such as “death” acts as a powerful tool for individuals seeking solace, as demonstrated by numerous empirical instances.

Chinese culture has developed a comprehensive and distinct linguistic system for euphemisms related to death. This system encompasses a range of expressions, such as “ascending to heaven”, “going to immortality”, “passing away”, “resigning from the world”, and “ascending”, among others. Each euphemism carries its own unique meaning and serves the purpose of avoidance. The usage of these

euphemisms varies depending on the context. For instance, under the strict hierarchical feudal system, the expressions used to describe the death of royal family members differ significantly from those used for ordinary citizens. Throughout various dynasties and regions, death has consistently been a taboo topic. Utilizing these euphemisms helps to avoid causing offense and provides emotional comfort. Moreover, they convey a sense of humanization and personalization. Scholars such as Liu Chunbao (2002) and Bao Huinan (2001) have noted that employing euphemisms when referring to “death” not only demonstrates respect for the deceased but also shows sufficient concern for the emotions of their family members. Directly mentioning death can lead to a strong emotional shock for the bereaved. By employing euphemisms, communication about sensitive topics becomes more manageable, minimizing the risk of misunderstanding or causing unnecessary emotional distress.

2.2. Politeness Function

Leech argued that verbal communication should adhere to six principles: decency, generosity, praise, humility, consistency, and sympathy. The purpose of these guidelines is to afford others ample freedom of expression, ensuring that the other party feels respected during communication. In return, the speaker can gain the goodwill of the listener (Guo Yunfei, 2005). Politeness is indicative of the advancement of human civilization and plays a crucial role in enhancing interpersonal communication. Politeness also represents one of the significant pragmatic functions of euphemisms. In this context, the use of humble euphemisms enables communication to occur in a gentle and pleasant atmosphere (Li Jinhua, 2009). This is particularly true when approaching sensitive topics such as age, appearance, salary, family, and other personal matters. Employing euphemisms in such instances allows individuals to express their thoughts accurately and helps evade potential misunderstandings between the speaker and listener. Furthermore, using euphemisms reduces the sensitivity and potential irritation associated with these delicate subjects. By employing euphemisms in communication, individuals can foster a respectful and harmonious interaction while avoiding unnecessary conflicts or discomfort. Indeed, the use of euphemisms not only helps to prevent strong emotional impacts on the listener but also preserves their dignity, fostering an atmosphere of elegance for both parties engaged in the dialogue. By employing euphemisms, the principle of mutual respect is upheld, minimizing the occurrence of unnecessary misunderstandings and verbal conflicts to the greatest possible extent. This, in turn, allows the interlocutor to feel more comfortable and at ease during communication activities. Ultimately, the use of euphemisms contributes to the promotion of a more harmonious relationship between individuals, facilitating smoother and more effective interpersonal interactions.

Mr. Wang: Mr. Zhang, long time no see!

Mr. Zhang: Yes, Mr. Wang, I haven't seen you for a long time.

Mr. Wang: Mr. Zhang, You have been taken good care of in recent days. And you look like more rounded during this period of time at home.

Mr. Zhang: Sure! If my weight has no changes, How can I stand up to my wife's careful care and the meat in my stomach.

Mr. Wang: So this is the legendary happiness fat !

The author uses this case as an example to illustrate how

euphemisms can fulfill their role in promoting politeness. In this instance, the speaker, Wang, playfully comments on Zhang's stature. Rather than explicitly mentioning Zhang's weight gain, Wang chooses to use the euphemism “getting more and more rounded”. This demonstrates Wang's sensitivity in his choice of language. Although Wang's intention is not to mock Zhang's weight, he is uncertain whether Zhang would be sensitive about his body size. Thus, in order to safeguard Zhang's dignity and prevent any potential discomfort, Wang opts for an appropriate euphemism. This helps to avoid misunderstandings and creates a more lighthearted and enjoyable atmosphere for communication. The use of euphemisms in such situations allows for playful banter without causing unintended harm or offense. Zhang's response in this case is fascinating. Despite not explicitly stating that he does not appreciate jokes about his figure, his subtle hints suggest that he is unconcerned about his body size and takes pride in gaining weight due to the love and care he receives from his wife. As a result, since Zhang himself does not attach importance to his figure, others naturally refrain from making any comments. Although Zhang's humorous and clever words do not directly express his discontent, they effectively and politely discourage Wang from continuing to joke about his physique. Fortunately, Wang is perceptive enough to understand the implications of Zhang's words and recognizes his stance on the matter of weight. As a result, Wang refrains from making any further comments or jests that might potentially displease Zhang. Instead, Wang uses Zhang's words to justify himself. The use of euphemisms in this scenario helps preserve the dignity of both parties involved and fosters a humorous and relaxed atmosphere for communication, making everyone feel comfortable and at ease.

The above case was cited to illustrate how euphemisms may perform a politeness function when discussing sensitive topics, such as a person's stature. As mentioned earlier, euphemisms can also assist us in addressing other delicate subjects such as appearance, disadvantage, disease, physical weakness, salary, and price. For instance, when referring to older individuals, there are several respectful terms available, including “senior citizen”, “the aged”, “the elderly”, or “advanced in age”. It is widely acknowledged that age is a highly sensitive topic in Western countries, where people often refrain from directly asking about someone's specific age. This cultural norm reflects a mindset that tends to avoid discussions about old age in Western society (Sun, 2007). The use of euphemisms, such as “old age”, can indeed fulfill people's psychological needs and facilitate discussions about sensitive topics like age when necessary. This approach helps to break down barriers and create a more comfortable environment for dialogue. There are numerous examples of substituting euphemisms in various contexts. Regarding descriptions of appearance, terms like “homely” and “plain” are often used instead of “ugly” when referring to individuals who may not fit conventional beauty standards. The use of the latter term can be offensive and insulting, whereas the former terms demonstrate respect for the individual being described. Similarly, “plump” may be used to replace “fat”, and “slender” may substitute for “skinny”. When discussing physical health conditions, it is often more sensitive and respectful to use the term “physically handicapped” instead of “disabled”. Similarly, when referring to cognitive challenges, words like “exceptional” or “special” can be employed in place of the potentially derogatory terms “unintelligent” or “foolish”. To

describe individuals who are deaf, it is common to use indirect language, such as referring to them as someone who has lost their hearing or faces difficulty in listening. Similarly, individuals who are blind can be described as someone who has lost their sight. Regarding price, it is more appropriate to use terms like “high” or “low” rather than “expensive” or “cheap” when describing costs. This avoids any negative connotations or judgments that may be associated with the latter terms. From a politeness standpoint, using euphemisms not only preserves the listener’s dignity but also helps both parties to establish a positive self-image during the conversation. Incorporating euphemisms can foster harmonious interpersonal relationships, and it is advisable to use them whenever appropriate (Yang, 2018).

2.3. Concealment Function

When individuals come across sensitive topics that are challenging to discuss, they often resort to using euphemisms as a roundabout way of addressing them. Euphemisms allow the speaker to conceal their true intentions under a veil of ambiguity. By using euphemisms, the speaker provides space for the listener to interpret the meaning and make choices based on their own preferences. This approach not only helps avoid the discomfort of a stagnant conversation but also considers the listener’s personal emotions. It demonstrates the speaker’s adeptness at navigating social interactions (Ma Fuying, 2010). Diplomacy is a unique field of study and practice that requires careful consideration of language and rhetoric. Diplomatic discourse is characterized by its politeness, strategy, and subtlety. Euphemisms align perfectly with the demands of international interactions, as they offer a way to address sensitive topics or unpleasant facts indirectly. Within the international diplomatic community, the use of euphemisms has become a customary practice to a certain extent. When engaging in diplomatic activities, diplomats consciously employ indirect euphemistic language strategies to establish and maintain positive relationships between speakers and listeners. This approach helps to avoid irritation, avoid embarrassment, and foster a conducive environment for cooperation, thereby enabling diplomats to gain the upper hand in their diplomatic endeavors (Ren Fengmei, 2012). Similarly, in the realm of domestic politics, where sensitivity is also prevalent, euphemisms fulfill the need for precision, politeness, and strategic language. By using euphemisms, speakers can express their ideas in a manner that is more acceptable to the listener. This fosters a positive relationship between the two parties involved in the conversation, ultimately facilitating the achievement of their common objectives.

Lixin Cao: As an ordinary person, I have no alternatives but to have enough food when I am confronted with extreme hunger. That’s the way of making a living.

Xianzhi Ai: The economic risk is a serious issue which afflicts people harshly. If without rigorous demonstration, people will be tortured absolutely for making up for the economic loopholes.

Xiaoge Mei: Eating too fast can lead to indigestion. Cooperation, instead of cutthroat competition which is the big enemy for safeguarding the market order and revitalizing the market vitality, is advantageous in every respect for both parties. As we are neighbors, why not adopt the win-win strategy to benefit both sides and realize the maximization of benefits since it is meaningless to engage in rat race.

Lixin Cao: It is wise to give play to one’s strength and

circumvent weakness. Let us shake hands to attract business.

The case is taken from a clip in the hot TV series *County Party Committee Compound* in 2022, and the TV show exemplifies the diligent efforts and commitment of grassroots cadres in pursuing their ideas and achieving upward mobility within the County Party Committee Compound. The case presented here portrays a conversation between key individuals in the context of a County Party Committee Compound. The characters involved include Ai, who holds the position of governor; Mei, serving as the secretary of Guangming County; and Cao, the governor of a neighboring county. In this scenario, Ai and Mei wish to address a concern with Cao, as the funds allocated for their county’s investment have been redirected to the neighboring county. They aim to have a conversation with Cao in order to express their clear stance on the matter and convey their belief that it is unethical to divert the funds. Additionally, Ai and Mei would like to persuade Cao that both counties should collaborate and work for their mutual benefit. The purpose of this conversation is to foster understanding, address the concern of fund allocation, and promote a cooperative approach to the development and progress of both counties. Because political topics are in general sensitive, brash speech would certainly put a person into an extremely adverse situation, bringing them unfavorable consequences, which include oral reprimands or removal from official posts. Due to their cautious nature, government workers have developed a tendency to express their opinions indirectly. This is commonly observed through their widespread use of euphemisms. Euphemisms allow them to conceal their true intentions while tactfully conveying their ideas, thus avoiding any potential discomfort for the listener. Simultaneously, by reading between the lines, the listener can grasp the main idea of the conversation, facilitating effective communication in a pleasant and relaxed atmosphere.

At the beginning, Cao’s words, “I have no alternatives but to have enough food when I am confronted with extreme hunger” actually means “Poverty is a pressing issue that affects individuals and communities worldwide. Economic development is the key to resolving poverty. I am afraid of poverty so I have no choice but to accelerate economic development”. In response to Cao’s attempt to downplay his own management abilities to justify his actions of diverting funds, Ai’s words highlight the gravity of the issue. Ai’s remarks serve as a warning, cautioning against the potential dangers of pursuing rapid economic development without adequate consideration for the consequences. This implies that prioritizing speed and immediate gains may lead to detrimental outcomes, which can be unsustainable in the long run. Building upon Ai’s statement, Mei adds an analogy by stating that “Eating too fast can lead to indigestion”. This metaphor reflects the idea that taking resources from others without considering the potential negative consequences may not ultimately bring benefits to oneself. Mei emphasizes the importance of cooperation among neighbors in order to achieve a mutually beneficial outcome, emphasizing the value of a win-win situation for all parties involved. Both Ai and Mei’s contributions to the conversation highlight the significance of responsible and sustainable decision-making, as well as the value of collaboration and cooperation for regional development. Indeed, the words used by Mei are a subtle way of showing that Mei will not punish Cao for his actions of diverting Bright County’s funds. Additionally, Mei’s words convey a hopeful message that emphasizes the

importance of collaboration and working together. By extending an olive branch through his words, Mei aims to initiate a potential resolution and see if Cao will be willing to accept and reciprocate the gesture. The use of euphemisms in this conversation serves to mask the deeper meanings behind their intentions. By employing plain and simple euphemisms, the speakers are able to convey their thoughts in a more polite and respectful manner, making the listener more receptive to them. This approach helps establish a positive rapport between the speakers and the listener, fostering a sense of understanding and cooperation for the benefit of all parties involved. In the end, Cao expresses his willingness to accept Mei's proposal, signaling a potential agreement to collaborate towards mutual development. These euphemisms and diplomatic gestures facilitate the establishment of a common understanding, leading to a sense of cooperation and development among the interlocutors.

3. Conclusion

The quote, "A good word warms people in winter, while a bad word saddens people in summer", highlights the wisdom and art of effective communication. Language serves as the carrier of information, and the impact of a sentence can vary depending on who delivers it and how it is expressed. Euphemisms, from a pragmatic standpoint, possess three functions: avoidance, politeness, and concealment.

The avoidance function of euphemisms allows speakers to tactfully address sensitive topics or avoid potentially offensive or uncomfortable language. This helps to consider the feelings of the listener and maintain mutual respect and comfort in the conversation. By using euphemisms appropriately, both parties can save their dignity and uphold a positive communication atmosphere. Euphemisms also serve the politeness function by promoting respectful speech. By choosing polite terms, speakers can demonstrate consideration and show respect towards others. This fosters a harmonious environment and contributes to maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships. The concealment function of euphemisms is another way they benefit communication. By using indirect or veiled language, speakers can subtly convey their true intentions without being too explicit. This can be particularly useful in delicate situations, helping to soften potential confrontations or contentious discussions.

Understanding the pragmatic function of euphemisms allows us to better comprehend their cognitive basis and use

them effectively. When used appropriately, euphemisms enhance the quality and efficiency of communication, facilitating effective understanding and conveying intentions with sensitivity. Mastering the use of euphemisms contributes to improved interpersonal communication and helps create a more harmonious social environment.

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