

Euphemisms in English: Semantic and Stylistic Considerations

Ali Hindi Hamoudi ¹

¹ University of Misan, Iraq, College of Education, Instructor, Department of English, Iraq

ali_hindi@uomisan.edu.iq .

Ali

Abstract

Language users often turn to euphemistic replacements in order to minimize the possible risks of those forbidden terms or phrases which are deemed too explicit or insulting for a given social circumstance. Hence, euphemism is a linguistic and cultural phenomenon that English speakers are familiar with as an indirect and polite strategy to deal with taboo topics. It is utilized as a substitute for subjects considered to be vulgar in social context. We use language to communicate and euphemism is a proper language style that people pursue in social communication in order to reach an ideal communication effect. The main purpose of this paper, therefore, is to shed light on the semantic and stylistic aspects of euphemisms in English.

Key Words: euphemisms, semantics, stylistics

Introduction

Language users interact with each other using different words and expressions. These expressions are either used directly or implicitly, depending on whether they are actions that save face or face threatening. Often the users seek to preserve social cohesion between the participants by using a powerful linguistic mechanism to replace the offensive or awkward words with friendly and respectful ones. This mechanism is called " euphemism" (**Ham, 2001**). A significant aspect of English is euphemism. It is basically a crucial means that most people , politicians, journalists, writers and others, use to accomplish different functions. It can also be used to convey various everyday realities such as the cooperative climate ,wide communications and so on. Therefore, achieving reasonable euphemism command is a basic requirement for understanding such realities. The linguistic act of euphemisms can be troublesome as most of them are necessarily unclear or undefined. They could turn the thinking of the receiver to wrong lines. Comprehending the user's implicated meaning of euphemistic expressions requires contextualization which plays a crucial role in this respect. With regard to creating euphemism, language users must flout at least one or more of Gricean maxims of the cooperative principle (quantity, quality, relevance and manner) that inevitably lead to conversational implications. Thus, in addition to their well- established roles in structural and discourse choices, floutings are shown to play an important role in lexical choices used to prevent possible loss of face. Speakers very often euphemize for many reasons that one of which is politeness. Euphemisms are also used to soften a vulgar expression

. Euphemisms are common feature of language use ; all people use them to talk about events that they find frightening (**e.g. war, illness, death, etc.**) because anthropologically, "speaking a name was to evoke the divinity whose strength then had to be confronted". Likewise, we use euphemisms to convey taboos, because we believe, at some instinctual level, that the euphemism holds us at a safe distance from the taboo itself. Another use of euphemisms is to raise the value of something (**e.g., using educator instead of teacher , attorney instead of lawyer**) ; but in general, we use euphemisms to express what is socially difficult to express in direct terms. (**Alkire , 2002**)

The goal of this paper is to emphasize the semantic and stylistic dimensions of euphemisms in English.

The Concept of Euphemism

Generally speaking, a euphemism is a mild or less direct word substituted for one that is harsh or blunt when referring to something unpleasant or embarrassing.

The concept euphemism has been defined by scholars differently, but the definitions do not differ very much. A euphemism is the use of pleasant, mild and indirect words instead of more precise and direct ones. In the words of (**Abrams,2005**) " A euphemism is an inoffensive expression used in place of a blunt one that is felt to be socially disagreeable". Euphemisms are used when talking about social issues considered to be "taboo or sensitive subjects". In a social context, expressions are often euphemized , that is, being covered by nice substitutions in order to avoid saying what is meant to say directly. This style of communication may hide a part of the truth. Euphemistic language is, therefore, called the language of evasion, of hypocrisy, of prudery, and of deceit" (**Holder,2002**). These

roundabout expressions are strongly related to politeness; "that which is polite is at least inoffensive and at best pleasing to an audience, and that which is offensive is impolite" (Allan and Burridge 2006). When we use euphemistic words or phrases, we avoid saying things we think the audience would rather not accept for various reasons. Sometimes it means that an orthophemism, or a more direct expression is not used, and sometimes it means that a dysphemism, a corresponding dispreferred word or phrase is avoided. The term "euphemism" refers to the replacement of a gentler phrase with a harsh or undesirable one. (Fromkin and Rodman ,1993) also define a euphemism as "a word or phrase that replaces a taboo word or serves to avoid frightening or unpleasant subjects". The Webster dictionary defines it as "the substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive term for one that may offend or suggest something unpleasant". Speakers will often try euphemizing their expressions as an attempt to be discrete, ambiguous or hide details while speaking in public. Euphemisms often stem from the need to avoid such taboo topics that traditionally have an adverse effect on standards. Taboo concepts deemed unfit for polite conversation including topics on sexual organs/sexual play, defecating and ethnic differences, etc. Moreover, as language a tool of communication, it may not be used all the same in every context due to its many styles. One such style is euphemization. That is , euphemisms are used as an active pragmatic strategy of speakers in a certain time and a certain situation.

Euphemisms can be classified into two general types , positive and negative euphemisms .(Rawson ,1981. Positive euphemisms can also be called stylistic euphemisms or exaggerating euphemisms. These inflate and magnify, making the referents look grander and more important than they really are . The negative euphemisms deflate, diminish and decrease negative values that are associated with negative phenomena such as, for example, war, drunkenness, crime, poverty, etc. They are defensive in nature, and deal with subjects that people prefer not to deal with directly. They are closely connected with the taboos. In reality, a euphemism and its taboo are two sides of the same coin. Though they have different faces, euphemisms refer to the same thing. They have a much more considerate face than the taboo.

The process of making topics presentable for more formal or polite situations is also part of euphemizing. Euphemisms and the process of euphemizing have the following characteristics. (Spears ,1981)

- A euphemism is an expression substituted for another expression which has acquired a negative connotation.
- A euphemism is an expression which is a synonym for a word or phrase of lower status.
- A euphemism is an expression deliberately created to raise the status of a concept.
- Euphemism is used to protect oneself or one's audience from embarrassment or other emotional discomfort.
- In the area of sexual taboo, euphemism signifies that the speaker is avoiding sexual overtures.
- Euphemism is used in polite, sexually mixed company to avoid the coarse terms of all-male groups.
- Euphemism is used in polite company to avoid the typical speech of lower levels of society.

The Semantic Aspect of Euphemisms

As euphemisms are alternatives for words or expressions that may seem vulgar, hurtful or otherwise offensive, they hold the same value as their taboo counterparts without appearing to be obscene. Euphemisms distort the meaning of an expression – a word or a phrase – to make it sound more pleasant. Since the intension of euphemizing language is to camouflage semantics and avoid saying what is meant, it is often called "the language of evasion, hypocrisy, prudery, and deceit. " . The use of euphemisms goes beyond linguistic or choice of words or phrase. Euphemism usage can equally influence our semantic choices and define the social cognition of language users. By using different words of the same act, euphemisms can clearly give rise to semantic problem. Euphemization is closely associated with the other semantic phenomenon- disinformation which can be defined as a deliberate deformation of truth or " a deliberate veiling of the truth" (Galperine,1977) . Such expressions as ' *free enterprisers* ' instead of ' *capitalists* ' , ' *profit* ' instead of ' *savings* ' ' *the building up of labour reserves* ' for *unemployment*, ' *dismissal* ' for *discharge*, *firing* can be interpreted only as a disinformation rather than euphemisms, because these names are not intended to give the referents their true names, but rather to distort the truth. The above expressions serve this purpose. Comparing these word combinations with real euphemisms, like *a four-letter word* (an obscenity); or *a woman of a certain type* (a prostitute); to glow (to sweat), all of which bring to our mind the other word and the referents (Op.cit.). One and the same semantic process – meiosis can underlie both in euphemization and distortion of the truth, disinformation, ' *pretty-plus girls* ' size (over large, plump, fat) girls' size). A politician who calls a nuclear disaster as an accident can be accused of lying, but a person who called a girl pretty-plus size instead of plump or fat is hardly a liar. Thus, euphemization and disinformation (lie, distortion, and deceit) are opposed in their communicative functions and cannot be united in one group of nomination. If we have the slightest interest in

the maintenance of our society, we must be aware of what strategies and mechanisms are used daily in “war with words” which is going on everywhere and in media communication per se, and what interests and ideologies underlie the constant deceptions and lies of our life.

In addition, positivising euphemisms are those in which negative semantic features are concealed and replaced by positive ones. According to this principle, a recession is called *minus or negative growth*, being bombarded or gunned by one's own troops is publicly admitted by speaking of *friendly fire*, old people are referred to as senior citizens, looting may be justified by calling it *redistribution of property*, aggressors or terrorists may call themselves *freedom fighters*, and a nuclear accident or even a nuclear catastrophe may be played down by referring to it as a simple *malfunction* (thereby substituting the feature 'of inestimable extent' by the feature 'of limited and calculable size'). Occupation will often be called *pacification*, while the colony or the occupied country itself is named *protectorate*. Unpleasant matters may even be euphemized by their opposite, e.g. war can be called *peace*, torture *love*, blatant lies can be called *truth*. (Burckhardt, 2010)

To speak euphemistically is to use language as a shield against the feared, the disliked, or the unpleasant. At their best, euphemisms avoid being offensive and have polite connotations. At the least, euphemisms seek to avoid too many negative connotations. (Allen and Burrige 1991). Not all euphemisms are necessarily deceptive because they can often protect against real damage, but it is often the case that they shift the course of conversation considerably and impede clear communication. (Op.cit.)

According to (Samoskaite, 2011) euphemisms can be subdivided into six semantic categories based on the topic they deal with. They are:

- Profession euphemisms (which refer to jobs/professions)
- Disease euphemisms (which refer to illnesses)
- Death euphemisms
- Sex euphemisms
- Crime euphemisms
- Political euphemisms (which refer to political issues)

The Stylistic Aspect of Euphemisms

As indicated earlier, a large number of euphemisms are not directly linked to taboos, rather they have more positive connotations and seem to be more appropriate in a particular context. Consequently, euphemism interacts with style and each certain style defines the set of euphemisms which are conventional within that style (Allan & Burrige, 2007 as cited in Bakhtiar, 2012). Therefore, such euphemisms emerge as a consequence of the stylistic insight of the speaker to preserve politeness throughout the discourse as stylistic euphemisms bear more optimistic connotations and are meant to address the denotatum appropriately. For example, interlocutors who hold equal physical and psychological status typically seek not to offend each other as much as possible. They do this by picking up an appropriate language or style.

Due to its various stylistics, language as a communication device can not be used exactly the same in any social situation. One such style is that of euphemization. Using euphemisms is an active pragmatic strategy of speakers in a certain time and a certain situation. In many cultures across the world where taboos are prevalent, they are subject to varying degrees of constraint and prohibition. It is however impossible to avoid speaking about unpleasant issues altogether. Euphemisms, on the other hand, are better ways of talking about such sensitive topics. They are embedded in the language we speak. Euphemism is a proper language style that people pursue in social communication in order to reach an ideal communication effect. Euphemisms are indirect expressions and for indirect expressing, stylistic means like figures of speech can be used for expressing euphemisms. As a stylistic means, a figure of speech is any deviation from literal statement or common use that emphasizes or clarifies or embellishes both written and spoken language. Hence, a euphemism is a figure of speech which means an expression in which the words are not used in their literal sense. Therefore, euphemisms are classified as figurative language which is the use of words in an unusual or imaginative manner. Euphemism is a stylistic device that consists in the substitution of an unpleasant word or expression by a conventionally more expectable one. This type of stylistic device is used to talk about something that may be construed as offensive and so the writer or speaker will use.

The following are the possible figures of speech through which euphemistic expressions can be expressed.

Metaphor – Metaphor is a very common figurative means used for euphemistic substitutions which are achieved through analogy. (Allan,1991) provides examples of metaphor used for euphemisms connected with death, e.g., *to pass into the next world*.

Metonymy – Another case of euphemistic substitution is the form metonymy. According to Allan, metonymy suggests a similar feature of two things. In case of euphemisms, the expression with negative connotation is denoted by association with the euphemistic term, e.g., *battle for alcoholic drink*.

Remodelling – Remodelling is usually used as a substitution for taboo words. Allan provides an example of Remodellings for damn which are e.g., darn, dang or drat. (Enright,2005) renders euphemistic remodelling for *God (Gosh)* and *Christ (cripes)*.

Hyperbole – Allan claims that hyperbole represents another type of euphemistic substitution . Hyperbole is a figure of speech which exaggerates the issue, therefore it is more used for dysphemisms which overstate the offense (He is the rottenest bastard I ever come across) because euphemisms rather reduce the sense, but e.g., *fight to glory for death*.

Understatement- Allan claims that understatement is a figure of speech used to express euphemisms by expressing only part of the true, e.g., expressions like *companion* or *friend* are used in reference to a *sexual partner*.

Synecdoche - According to Allan, synecdoche is a figure of speech that signifies an issue by pointing out only part of the problem, e.g., *I've got a cough* without mentioning other symptoms.

Periphrasis - Periphrasis , also known as circumlocution, is defined as an effort to express some sensitive or offensive issue without mentioning it directly, but through circuits and indirect phrases which take a form of a little story. (Op.cit)

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to shed light on the semantic and stylistic aspects of euphemisms in English. The term " euphemism" has been defined and discussed. It has been observed from the discussions that euphemization is a common phenomenon among almost all speakers of English and speakers of other languages. It has been shown that euphemisms are utilized to mitigate taboo topics and to avoid face threats. Semantically, euphemisms misrepresent the essence of an expression to make it sound more appealing to the hearer since the intention behind euphemizing language is to camouflage semantics and avoid saying what is meant. In some other function, euphemisms are used to mark different speech styles. Here, euphemisms are considered words with more pleasant and positive connotation and seek to promote the denotatum of words to fit in a particular context. When a word or phrase is used euphemistically, it becomes a metaphor whose real meaning is diminished. Euphemisms function as a stylistic marker so that their use is not as a response to taboo topics, rather, are subtle means of expressing one's thought which fits in the context of use.

In reality, a euphemism and its taboo equivalent are two sides of the same coin. Though they have different faces, euphemisms refer to the same thing. They have a much more considerate face than the taboo.

References

- Abrams,M.H.,& Harpham.(2005) . *A glossary of literary terms*. USA: Thomson Higher Education
- Alkire, S. (2002). *Introducing Euphemisms to Language Learners*. The Internet TESL Journal. <http://iteslj.org/Lessons/Alkire-Euphemisms.html>
- Allan, K. & K. Burridge (2006). *Forbidden Words*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Allen, K. & Kate, B. (1991). *Euphemism and Dysphemism: Language Used as a Shield and Weapon*. Oxford University Press
- Bakhtiar, M. (2012). *Communicative functions of euphemisms in Persian*. The Journal of International Social Research
- Burchardt, A. & Nerlich, B. (2010) . *Tropical Truth(s): The Epistemology of Metaphor and other Tropes*. New York

: De Gruyter

Enright, D. (2005). *In Other Words: The Meanings and Memoirs of Euphemisms*. London: Michael O' Mara Books Limited.

Fromkin, V. & Rodman, R. (1993). *An Introduction to Language*. Harcourt Brace College Publishers.

Galperine, I. (1977). *Stylistics*. Moscow: Vyschaya škola

Ham, K. (2001). *The Linguistics of Euphemism: A Diachronic Study of Euphemism Use and Formation*. University of Surrey. Available at: [www.surrey-ac.uk / ALRG/ dissertations/ / Indexes/index-lit-html/-izk](http://www.surrey-ac.uk/ALRG/dissertations/Indexes/index-lit-html/-izk).

Holder, R.W. (2002). *How Not to Say What You Mean: A Dictionary of Euphemisms*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Katamba, F. (2005). *English words: structure, history, usage*. New York: Routledge Rawson, H. (1981). *A Dictionary of Euphemisms and Other Doubletalk*. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc.

Samoskaite, L. (2011). *21st Century Political Euphemisms in English Newspapers: A Semantic and Structural study*. Department of English philology, Vilnius Pedagogical University. M.A paper. (unpublished)

Spears, R. A. (1981). *Slang and Euphemism: A dictionary of oaths, curses, insults, sexual slang and metaphor, racial slurs, drug talk, homosexual lingo, and related matters*: Middle Village New York