

## **A pragmatic Analysis of English Euphemism and Its Implication for English Teaching in China**

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### **Abstract**

As the product of socio-cultural psyche of human beings, euphemism has lubricated social communication since it came into being. This paper is to explore euphemism from pragmatic perspective to reveal that most euphemisms have violated the generally observed Gricean Cooperative Principle (CP) to cater to people's various socio-cultural psychological needs, such as politeness and face, so as to lubricate communication.

**Keywords:** euphemism, Gricean Cooperative Principle(CP), politeness, face

### **Introduction**

As a kind of trope employed in such English-speaking countries as Britain, America, and Australia etc, euphemism is an indirect strategic verbal expression substituting the expression with an unpleasant connotation by producing some psychological distance between the signifier and the signified of a linguistic sign to get rid of psychological disturbance, so as to ensure a smooth communication and harmonious interpersonal relationships. Characterized by avoidance language and evasive expression through producing some psychological distance between the signifier and the signified of a linguistic sign, euphemism may violate the generally observed Gricean Cooperative Principle to overcome psychological obstacles in social verbal communication, so as to create harmony and strengthen the social fabric.

### **Gricean Cooperative Principle and Euphemism**

Social verbal communication is one of the most pervasive of human social activities, and it is supposed to smoothly take place if participants mutually recognize that their own behaviors and use of language as well as their interpretations of the behaviors and utterances of others are governed by certain rules and conventions. For example, there are conventions governing how close to one another interlocutors should stand; how to make requests politely; how to begin and end phone conversations; how to show interest in what Speaker is saying, and how to offer thanks, etc. In 1975, Grice presented four different kinds of cooperation governing the most typical forms of social behavior. He formulated them as the following four maxims which are inclusively called Cooperative Principle prescribing the rules of behavior that participants in social communication are expected to observe during a linguistic exchange:

1) The Maxim of Quality

Try to make your contribution one that is true, specifically

- (a) Do not say what you believe to be false
- (b) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence

This means that people should be genuine and sincere in social verbal communication.

2) The Maxim of Quantity

- (a) Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purpose of the exchange
- (b) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required

This means that people should make the strongest claim possible consistent with their perception of the facts, while giving no more and no less information than is required to make their messages clear to the part of the audience

3) The Maxim of Relevance

Make your contribution relevant

That is to say that in general, an expression should not be irrelevant to the context in which it occurs, because that makes it difficult for the part of the audience to comprehend.

4) The Maxim of Manner

Be perspicuous, and specifically:

- (a) Avoid obscurity
- (b) Avoid ambiguity
- (c) Be brief
- (d) Be orderly

That's to say that where possible, meaning should be presented in a clear, concise manner that avoids ambiguity, and avoids misleading or confusing audiences through stylistic ineptitude.

However, influenced by socio-cultural psyche, in social verbal communication, people avoid using expressions with unpleasant connotations by using euphemisms to get rid of the unpleasant psychological associations, and to avoid negative psychological responses, hence overcoming the psychological obstacles, making the communication go on smoothly, and thereby harmonizing interpersonal relationships. Therefore, they have to reconstruct expressions through the violation of the general Cooperative Principle of linguistic exchange. As a kind of trope governed by socio-cultural psyche most euphemisms violate at least one of the four maxims of the generally observed Gricean Cooperative Principle.

First, euphemism violates the Maxim of Quality. The Maxim of Quality demands people to state as facts only what they believe to be truths and facts. However, euphemism is employed like a shield against the feared and the unpleasant; it is employed as a shield against scorn to upgrade the denotatum; or it is employed deceptively to conceal the unpleasant realities of the denotatum. In short, many euphemisms are cosmetic and phony. For example:

Retired Marine Colonel John V. Brennan contracted with the secretive arms dealer to sell Iraq \$181 million worth of uniforms. According to a lawsuit filed last March, former Vice President Spiro Agnew served as an “intermediary” between the two. How much money did Agnew make in the deal? Soghnanlian, the dealer, says, “**He did not go hungry.**” (范 176)

In a deal of \$181 million, as an intermediary, Agnew is sure to have made big money. So the negative litotes “He didn’t go hungry” undoubtedly tones down the fact in order to achieve a humorous and satirical effect.

Second, euphemism violates the Maxim of Quantity. Let me take a refusal letter from an American University to a Chinese student who has applied to study there for example:

*Dear Miss Zhou,*

*We have received all your application and qualification forms and read them through We all acknowledge that you are really a remarkable student Your academic achievements and talents demonstrated in other areas have impressed us greatly. But the fact is that only 21 international students are allowed and you are the alternative number 4. But this does not mean that you have no chance to study here. If any of those 21 students can not enter for various reasons, then there is still the hope of your enrollment.* (徐 22)

*In fact, the message of the long passage can be summarized as follows: You are not qualified to study in our university. But the adoption of euphemistic expression as shown in the letter at least has brought some comfort to the student.*

Third, some euphemisms violate the Maxim of Relevance which provides enough reason for us to expect people to use this expression in this context in the particular form in which it occurs, rather than maintain silence or employ some different expressions. Take the following letter of recommendation for example:

*Dear Sir,*

*Mr. Smith's command of English is excellent, and his attendance to tutorials has been regular.* (何 99)

The background of the letter is that a student named Smith pleads his tutor to recommend him to work in the field of philosophy. But the tutor knows clearly that his student isn't fit for the job, so he deliberately violates the Maxim of Relevance. and suggests euphemistically that Smith is unfit to work in the field of philosophy. A similar example is as follows:

A: Don't you think she is beautiful?

**B: *She has a wonderful personality.***

In this dialogue, obviously, B's answer is off the point to A's question, which indirectly shows she isn't beautiful.

Fourth, most euphemisms violate the Maxim of Manner. They are indirect, vague, evasive and ambiguous, e.g., *social disease* for "syphilis," *disadvantaged* for "the poor"; *She has an accident* for "She is pregnant" and words like *this, it, the problem, the thing* for anything, etc. For a typical example, see the following dialogue:

A: It's gone very cold, hasn't it?

B: M-It's freezing.

A: M-I'm...

**B: *You're knitting.* ( laughs quietly for-) *What are you knitting. That's not a tiny garment.***

A: No.

B: (laughs for-)

A: No. It's for me but it's very plain.

(Crystal & Davy 98)

In this dialogue, B's real intention is to know whether A is pregnant or not, but B only says vaguely, "What are you knitting. That's not a tiny garment." This hints to A that it doesn't fit the baby. However, B's remark is so vague that at first, it doesn't even make sense to A.

From the above illustration, now we can see that in social communication, most euphemisms have violated at least one of the four maxims of the Cooperative Principle in order to cater to people's psychological needs, which are socially and culturally based and gradually deposited as a state of mind of people in Western society, so as to harmonize interpersonal relationships and lubricate social communication. As the product of human minds, euphemisms are outward and visible signs of human inward anxieties, conflicts, fears, shames and bits of deep seated modesty lurking in the remote corners of the sub consciousness. They are like radioactive isotopes. By tracing them, it's possible to see what has been going on in the minds of people in English-speaking countries, such as Britain, America and Australia, etc.

### **Politeness**

Individuals live in societies, especially today, when science and technology are highly developed, nobody can live in isolation. Politeness, as a social restraint, some kind of social norm imposed by the conventions of the community, every member of the community feels obliged to observe in order to maintain the smooth, harmonious interpersonal relationships called for by any social community.

### **The Face Theory**

An important theory on politeness is the face theory presented by Brown and Levinson in 1978, which is based on the face notion put forward by Goffman in the late 50s. In Goffman's opinion, "face" is a sacred thing for every human being, an essential factor communicators all have to pay attention to; face wants are reciprocal, i.e., if one wants his face cared for, he should care for the face of others. This calls to mind that concise comprehension rule in Scripture: Do unto all men as you would they should do unto you.

The general notion of "face" of Goffman became much more specific in Brown and Levinson's theory. They think that the problem for any social group is to control its internal aggression while retaining the potential for aggression both in internal social control and especially, in external competitive relations with other groups. Politeness is the presupposition of that potential for aggression as it seeks to disarm it, and makes possible communication between potentially aggressive parties.

They define "face" as an individual's self-esteem, and further distinguish two kinds of face: positive face-the desire to be approved of, and negative face-the desire to be unimpeded in ones actions.

### Politeness Principle (PP)

Another important theory on politeness is Leech's Politeness Principle. Leech regards PP as a member of a set of principles that he calls Interpersonal Rhetoric; other important principles within Interpersonal Rhetoric include the Cooperative Principle and the Irony Principle. These principles, together with other principles within Textual Rhetoric, socially constrain communicative behavior in various ways; and they serve as regulative factors to ensure that once conversation is under way, it will follow a fruitful and smooth path. Instead of basing his theory on the notion of face, Leech patterns on Grice's CP and divides the PP into a number of maxims by distinguishing self and other, i.e., Tact Maxim, Generosity Maxim, Approbation Maxim, Modesty Maxim, Agreement Maxim, and Sympathy Maxim

- 1) Tact Maxim
  - (a) Minimize cost to other
  - (b) Maximize benefit to other
- 2) Generosity Maxim
  - (a) Minimize benefit of self
  - (b) Maximize cost to self
- 3) Approbation Maxim
  - (a) Minimize dispraise of other
  - (b) Maximize praise of other
- 4) Modesty Maxim
  - (a) Minimize praise of self
  - (b) Maximize dispraise of self
- 5) Agreement Maxim
  - (a) Minimize disagreement between self and other
  - (b) Maximize agreement between self and other
- 6) Sympathy Maxim
  - (a) Minimize sympathy between self and other
  - (b) Maximize sympathy between self and other

Social communication is generally oriented towards maintaining face and being polite, and one of the ground rules in social communication is a tacit agreement between the different parties that everyone should operate with the theory of face and the PP in mind. Every time people open their mouth, they have to consider whether what they say is likely to maintain the face of others and shows that they are polite, because it is conventional to appear to be polite, whatever one's true feelings. And euphemism is an important means to avoid any potential face affront to the others and to show politeness to the others. Generally speaking, the greater the oncoming face-affront, the greater is the politeness shown, and the greater the degree of euphemism required. For instance, in contemporary society. unemployment, menial or unskilled jobs and poverty are considered great face affront. Therefore, rich euphemism arise in these fields, e.g. *involuntarily leisured, unpagged, and between jobs* for "the unemployed"; *unemployment benefits* for "dole cheque"; *sanitary engineer, waste-reduction managers, garbologist, exterminating engineer* for "garbage collector"; *fitness coordinators* for "health- club staff; *footwear maintenance engineer* for "bootblack"; *building maintenance engineer* for "janitor"; *domestic help* for "housekeeper"; *captain* for " head waiter"; *service manager* for "air-hostess"; *tonsonial artist* for "barber"; *secretary* for "typist"; *shoe rebuilder* for "cobbler"; *meat technologist* for " butcher"; *land-scape architect* for "gardener"; *beautician, mortician, funeral director or grief therapist* for "undertaker"; *administrative assistant* for "secretary"; *access controller* for "doorman"; *vice-president* for "middle manager"; and *needy,*

*underprivileged*, or *the indigent* for "poor"; *cash advance* for "debt," and *out off the game* for "bankruptcy," etc. All these euphemisms are motivated by a feeling that the least the referents deserve is what the comedian Rodney Dangerfield called "a little, simple, decent respect" (Newman & Silver 291). In the same way, a critical comment can be ameliorated with some sort of hedging expressions to soften the potential face-affront to the hearer.

### **Implications for English Teaching in China**

Traditionally, English teaching in China has been mainly test-oriented. Many people complain that China's education focuses too much attention on students' scores. The same is true of English teaching in China. Many English teachers just care about students' performance in the exams, so that they teach a lot of vocabulary and grammar while ignoring students' communicative ability and cultural awareness. English euphemism is an important part of western culture. English euphemism is a good channel for students to western culture and plays a very important role in students' communication with westerners. If students can learn English euphemism well, they can improve a lot in intercultural communication. So, it's of great significance to teach students to use euphemism in class. Besides, teaching should involve the joint efforts of both parties --the teacher and the student. If a harmonious class atmosphere is created by both parties, the English class would be more effective and go on more smoothly. Thus English teachers should take students' self-esteem, inhibition and anxiety in language learning into consideration and employ euphemistic expressions in class in order to remove these negative factors. For example, teachers should abandon the simple value laden terms like "lazy," "idle," "stupid," and replace them with expressions like educationally and socially disadvantaged groups, underachievers, those in the lower end of the ability scale, etc. More examples are as follows: He is a bit slow for his age or He seems to be mentally retarded for "The student is obtuse"; He has got less than a passing grade for a few major courses or I'm sorry to find him an underachiever for some major courses for "He has failed(flunked)many major courses"; I'm afraid he has to exert himself in his study, Probably he has to devote himself more diligently to his studies, He is sure to go far if he can use his resources fully, He'll get somewhere if he is highly motivated, He needs to raise his ambition level a bit, He'd better take his lessons more seriously for "The student is lazy"; He needs to develop quieter habits of communication for "The student is noisy"; He needs help in learning to use his leadership qualities democratically, He is quarrelsome and often browbeats, frightens or hurts smaller or weaker pupils for "The student is a bully"; He is likely to embroider the truth a bit, He may occasionally fall into terminological inexactitude, He can be categorically inaccurate sometimes, He has difficulty distinguishing between imaginary and factual information for "He lies; He needs help in learning to adhere to rules and standards off air play for "The student cheats" and He needs your lordship if your Lordship pleases, etc; they will then proceed to make their submissions rather than "present their arguments"; and this should always be carried out with (the greatest of respect).

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