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THE USE OF EUPHEMISMS FOR DIFFERENT PURPOSES

УПОТРЕБЛЕНИЕ ЭВФЕМИЗМОВ ДЛЯ РАЗЛИЧНЫХ ЦЕЛЕЙ

People control their speech and behavior in their daily life. A person's social-cultural level is reflected in both his behavior and speech. It is a matter of speech culture to determine which words and phrases are appropriate to use. There are a number of means for successful presentation of one's social cultural level. One of such kinds of means is euphemisms, which are used to make the speech attractive and nuanced. Euphemisms are elements in the language system that differ from other words in certain ways. The use of euphemisms has different characteristics and their determination mainly depends on the purpose of euphemisms. The article deals with the use of euphemisms as a social norm and some misunderstandings occurring from their usage. Cultural context of the use of euphemisms is also the main part of the article.

Key words: euphemisms; different contexts; social norms; misunderstanding; cultural diversity.

Люди контролируют свою речь и поведение в повседневной жизни. Социально-культурный уровень человека отражается как в его поведении, так и в речи. Определение того, какие слова и словосочетания уместны в употреблении, является вопросом культуры речи. Существует ряд средств для успешной презентации своего социокультурного уровня. Одним из таких средств являются эвфемизмы, которые используются для придания речи привлекательности и нюансированности. Эвфемизмы – это элементы языковой системы, которые определенным образом отличаются от других слов. Употребление эвфемизмов имеет различный характер и его определение во многом зависит от цели эвфемизмов. В статье рассматривается употребление эвфемизмов как социальной нормы и некоторые недоразумения, возникающие при их использовании. Культурный контекст употребления эвфемизмов также является основной частью статьи.

Ключевые слова: эвфемизмы; различные контексты; социальные нормы; недопонимание; культурное разнообразие.

According to Cambridge English Dictionary euphemism is the use of a word or a phrase to avoid saying another word or phrase that may be unpleasant or offensive [1]. Whether orally or in a written form, people express the information they have in their mind, they describe the circumstances, events, subjects and objects by choosing words that create different feelings and excitement in their audience. It is doubtless to say that the effect and reaction caused by words are not

always pleasant. The use of many unpleasant words causes high excitement in the listener and creates bad mood. The most basic feature of euphemisms is to reduce the negative feature in any concept. According to Amy Pei-Jung Lee the use of euphemistic expressions related to time, place and context is for the purpose of politeness. Many social relationships require participants to behave politely to protect their reputation, and this requirement gives rise to the use of euphemistic expressions [2, p. 353].

The aim of the research on the topic "The Use of Euphemisms for Different Purposes" is to explore how euphemisms are employed in various contexts to soften, mask, or alter the perception of reality. The present article helps learners of English to understand and be skillful in the use of various contents in a distinctive way.

I. The use of euphemisms for social purposes

1. Euphemisms in different contexts

Euphemisms must reflect and reinforce social norms; being polite, respecting each other, being aware of sensitive topics, etc. They somehow put us into the "frame" that leads us to the acceptable way of how it is appropriate to communicate in the social sphere. K. Allan and K. Burridge offer a functional account of the various expressions of euphemism and dysphemism from a pragmatic perspective. They state that an interesting perspective on the human psyche is to be gained from the study of euphemism used "as a protective shield against the anger or disapproval of natural or supernatural beings". Euphemism is described as an expression that seeks to avoid being offensive, thus defined by reference to face. They focused on the correlation between euphemism and context that could influence the interpretation of euphemism and restrict its application [3, p. 12]. Here are some contexts where euphemism is used as a social norm:

a) Politeness and respect. When we communicate in a social sphere, we have to follow some social norms in order to be polite and respectful. Although some euphemisms bear lexical meanings while others have idiomatic ones, the main purpose is to ensure that social relationships, especially, in formal settings are maintained. Examples of such euphemistic expressions are as follows:

Toilet – restroom;

Fired – let go, workforce reduction, career transition;

To be pregnant – in a family way, bun in the oven.

b) Cultural identity. Euphemisms are widely used for culturally sensitive issues one of which is openly speaking about "death" related topics. Both in literature and in everyday speech, the writers and speakers use such euphemism with tact and diplomacy in order not to have a bad impact on their audience.

To die – to join the majority, to pass away;

Cemetery or burial ground – final resting place.

c) Personal identity. One of the ways of using these paraphrastic expressions is about "age, appearance, ability" and so on.

Old – senior citizen, golden years, elderly people;
Blind – visually impaired;
Behavioral health issues – mental wellness journey;
Short in height – vertically challenged;
Fat – fluffy, overweight, obese.

2. Misunderstanding of euphemisms for social norms and best ways of avoiding them

Although the main purpose of using euphemisms is to soften rude and harsh concepts with more acceptable or pleasant words, misunderstanding can certainly arise by their usage in the social sphere, and it can lead to confusion, offence, doublespeak, deception and other negative impacts. In some cases, people using euphemisms may have dishonest and deceitful influence. There are several reasons for it. One of the reasons is that euphemisms can have different interpretations which may lead to ambiguity. “In a given context, participants should choose appropriate euphemisms to achieve the purpose of communication. If the participants understand the social context very thoroughly and select the appropriate euphemisms, the communication will go smoothly” [4, p. 55].

The use of “pass away” or its variants among the people who are not aware of the context can be ambiguous and confusing. The other reason for misunderstanding is cultural difference, i.e. a euphemism polite in one culture might be disrespectful in the other one. For example, in one culture speaking about age and calling someone “old” can be acceptable but in another culture it can be impolite and sometimes even abusive. Finally, the generation gap is also one of the factors that the use of euphemisms is understood in a different way. For instance, the use of different meanings with different euphemisms either may not be understood appropriately by elderly people, or misused by them leading to disagreement or embarrassment.

To live rent free – to occupy someone’s thoughts (often in a positive way);
No cap – to be serious or truthful;
Salty – to be upset or bitter.

In order to avoid all the misunderstandings mentioned above, one should first of all, know his/her audience, i.e. people must think about who they are speaking to, considering their age, moral principles, preferences and so on. Besides, people should be sincere in using euphemisms, they should avoid using them just for the sake of sounding polite or respectful. Although politeness and respect is the main criterion in euphemisms, people should make sure not to lose balance and avoid overusing them. Because the excessive use of them can lead to insincerity or falsehood.

“As a valuable linguistic means euphemisms grant the language users to cope with sensitive situations in a tactful and creative way” [5, p. 205]. Despite the fact that ambiguous, excessive, unconscious usage of euphemisms can lead to misinterpretation, they can enrich conversations, and can lead to generally acceptable positive social interactions.

II. The use of euphemisms in cultural context

Numerous social and cultural factors can contribute to the use of euphemisms in different cultures. In a society where speaking directly in some negative sensitive topics such as death or illness, the use of euphemisms helps soften their meanings. When doctors find something serious in their patients, they would not speak about it with the patients themselves, they would either speak to their relatives or when they speak to the patients, they will certainly use euphemisms.

Family is one of the other social spheres where direct speech in some topics such as marriage, the birth of a child etc. is found disrespectful among elderly people. For example, in some regions of Azerbaijan a man as respect to elderly people does not call his wife openly as “my wife”, instead he would say “the mother of the children”. Or a wife does not call her husband directly, instead she says “the man of the house”. But the general phrase for “husband-wife (spouse)” is “companion of life (həyat yoldaşı)” which is also used for the purpose of respect. Overall, the use of euphemisms in Azerbaijani culture underlines the importance of maintaining respect in communication.

Euphemisms in English are also used to soften the sensitive effect of different topics. People try to speak politely and tactfully, in a way acceptable to social norms. We can come across both direct and indirect speeches in English literature. For instance in the following example taken from “A Place Called Freedom”, a euphemistic way of speech (father’s not your creditor anymore – dead) is used in order to inform the child about her father’s death.

“But Father’s not your creditor anymore,” Robert said, “He’s dead.” “Dead?” Jay sat down again abruptly. Then shock was profound. Father was not yet fifty [6, p. 503].

In the following example, the word “woman” is used in a euphemistic way as “other half”.

He’d never had to take care of another person; he’d never even had a pet. Kate was the first woman Sean had ever been serious about. He wasn’t totally certain what to do with his other half [7, p. 89].

The examples prove that euphemisms are often used to add deeper meaning or to enrich the cultural narrative in literature.

III. Evaluation of English euphemisms by native speakers

The euphemisms in this article have been analysed from two points of view for cultural study. In the first case, they were approached from different categories according to their usage. In this article I gathered some ways of addressing spouses euphemistically and grouped them in two categories: euphemisms referred to spouses with negative and positive connotations; euphemisms generally used by a husband to a wife or vice versa.

Category 1

Euphemisms referring to spouses	
Positive Connotation	Negative connotation
better half, significant other, other half boss little lady (colloquial way) old lady helpmeet (biblical) angel, sweetheart, darling queen, goddess, light of my life	ball and chain trouble and strife devil's daughter

Through the etymology of the euphemisms with negative connotations we can come to the conclusion that they are generally used by husbands in addressing their wives. But in general, euphemisms with both positive and negative meanings are mainly used by men.

Category 2

Euphemisms used according to genders	
Women	Men
significant other, other half boss helpmeet (biblical)	better half boss (generally jocular way of addressing to wife) little lady (colloquial way) old lady ball and chain (generally husband for his wife) trouble and strife devil's daughter angel, sweetheart, darling queen, goddess, light of my life

We can also guess from the second category that men usually refer to their wives with euphemisms more than women.

In the second case for the study of euphemisms for cultural purposes, a questionnaire was offered by me to native English speakers at Northern Arizona University (NAU) in the United States for the purpose of research in native speakers' evaluation and use of euphemisms related to different contexts. The research was conducted at NAU when I was there for my Fulbright Faculty Development program (from August, 2024 to January, 2025). The participants were aged twenty-one to fifty-five, there were fifteen of them (6 males and 9 females) and they included TESOL teachers doing their MA and PhD degrees

and people working in other offices at NAU. The participants were asked to answer the following questions (numbers in parenthesis are the numbers of the respondents):

1. In which contexts do you find yourself using euphemisms the most appropriate? (Check all that apply)

- In professional or workplace settings (8)
- In casual or social settings (6)
- In conversations about sensitive topics (e.g. death, illness, money) (10)
- When speaking with children (3)

The respondents have chosen different answers for this question and it is clear that they try to use euphemisms for sensitive topics in order to soften the harsh meaning of the concepts.

2. Which of the following euphemisms have you heard or used before? Which do you prefer to use, direct or indirect? Write your own variant if you remember any.

Indirect	Direct
Passed away	Died
Senior citizen	Old person
Let go	Fired
Economically disadvantaged	Poor
Correctional facility	Prison
Mentally challenged	Disabled
My better half, sweetheart	Wife
In a family way	Pregnant

The participants' answers to the second question are various: although almost all underlined that they knew the above-mentioned euphemisms, there were some who preferred direct speech, i.e. not using euphemisms, and only one male participant added his own variant, which was "They are tripping" meaning "They are using drug". We can come to the conclusion that people use euphemisms rarely in spontaneous situations.

3. How do you feel about the use of euphemisms for sensitive topics like death, illness, or disability?

- Very positive (5)
- Somewhat positive (6)
- Neutral (4)
- Somewhat negative (0)
- Very negative (0)

4. Do you believe euphemisms sometimes create confusion or misunderstanding?

- Yes, often (5)
- Occasionally (7)
- Rarely (3)
- No, never (0)

According to the answers to the third and fourth questions we can come to the conclusion that although the respondents accept euphemisms positively, they also find them confusing. As it has been mentioned above, the use of euphemisms can lead to misunderstanding.

The goal of the following second part of the survey was to evaluate the participants' perception of euphemisms from cultural and social points. These questions help explore how culture and society influence the use of euphemisms.

5. Do you think euphemisms are more commonly used in your culture or community compared to other cultures?

- a. Yes (8)
- b. No (3)
- c. Not sure (4)

6. In your opinion, why do people use euphemisms instead of direct language?

- a. To be polite or respectful (9)
- b. To avoid discomfort or embarrassment (2)
- c. To conform to social norms (4)
- d. To make a topic easier to talk about (0)

7. Do you believe that using euphemisms can lead to a lack of clarity in communication?

- a. Yes (4)
- b. No (2)
- c. Sometimes (7)
- d. Not sure (2)

8. How would you express your idea in the following situations?

- a. You are not satisfied with the person that you date?

Males' answers	Females' answers
Tell them that we are not a match. We are not a great match. It is not working out. Best way is to be friends. Sorry, but we can't continue. I will directly tell the truth.	It's great to talk to you. I think we can be friends. This isn't working out. I don't think we are compatible. We can no longer be together, let's break up. Hey, I'm sorry, but I'm not feeling this connection anymore. Can we just be friends? I'll be direct. I'm not satisfied with our being together. I feel I'm not real person for you. We're different.

b. You do not like the meal that you are served as a guest?

Males' answers	Females' answers
I'm just stuffed beforehand.	I appreciate your effort.
I'll ask if I could get something else.	I ate before coming here.
The meal does not appeal to my taste.	I'm full.
I've recently had meal.	It's really good, but I ate before coming here.
I would prefer silent.	Would you mind if I try something else?
Keep silent.	I have an allergy to an ingredient.
	I'm on a diet.
	It is not for my taste.
	I'll have some tea.

The last question reveals cultural diversity and shows how strictly or directly American people approach some situations, and how much the use of euphemisms in their speech is acceptable or usual.

Euphemism is a prevalent sociolinguistic and linguistic phenomenon. It is the outcome of the interaction of several pragmatic and social psychological features. Additionally, social development, moral and social values, and cultural commonalities can all be reflected in it. With the evolution of civilization, euphemisms have become an essential component of communication. Furthermore, it is closely related to pragmatics, and linguists worldwide are becoming more concerned with the pragmatic role of euphemism. People always apply pragmatic considerations to the usage of euphemisms during communication. Sensitive topics are addressed carefully and tactfully with the use of euphemisms for different purposes, in different social spheres. They play a significant role in forming our communication, in getting on well with different people in different situations. Euphemisms simultaneously reflect cultural values and social norms with their nature of softening negative impact of some topics. Even though euphemisms encourage politeness, their use necessitates caution to prevent misinterpretation. According to two categories about the euphemisms referred to spouses we see how dimensional usage they own. It is the power of language that navigates conversations with empathy and awareness. The data collected via the questionnaire provide a valuable insight into the changes in perception and use of different linguistic items as euphemisms. Through the survey the participants reveal that euphemisms are differently accepted in different situations and they are one of the ways to identify the culture of the community. The importance of the speaker's intention is quite evident in certain instances of choosing euphemisms. The analysis of euphemisms is especially relevant as it provides an insight into a specific sociocultural context at a given time, i.e., into those areas of life that are considered especially sensitive in a given context. Linguistic expressions used to refer to aspects of life, such as those referring to topics like death, diseases, aging, or other sensitive matters, often employ euphemisms to soften the impact of harsh realities, avoid discomfort, or adhere to social norms and taboos.

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