



# The Difference between Understatement and Euphemism in Social Speech Interaction

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## Abstract

Understatement is the antonym of hyperbole often used for irony to down play a catastrophe, sometimes, it is a statement which is deliberately weakened to sound ironical or softened to sound more polite while Euphemism is the use of a vague or indirect expression in place of one which is thought to be unpleasant, embarrassing, or offensive. (Crystal 1992:128 and Collins, 2017: 1)

The present research deals with the problem of what is the difference between understatement and Euphemism, and is there any relation between them? And what type of relation is?

This difference is clarified by using different and various examples of the use of Euphemism and understatement by the conversation of people in society.

The present research concludes that understatement and Euphemism, both of them are different phenomena, but there is a clear relation between them and they overlap with each other and part of understatement is a way of expressing Euphemism, thus, understatement is a part of Euphemism, but Euphemism is not a part understatement.

**Key Words:** understatement, understatement, antonym, hyperbole, embarrassing, Litotes.



## ملخص البحث

أن التصريح المكبوح هو الكلمة ذات المعنى المتناقض او (المتضاد اللغوي) لصيغة المبالغة والذي غالبا ما يستخدم للسخرية والتقليل من الكارثة او الصدمة، كما انه في بعض الاحيان يعتبر حالة تستخدم عمدا بصوت السخرية لتضعيف وتخفيف الصدمة وليبدو استخدام العبارة اكثر تهديبا، في حين ان تلطيف العبارة هو استخدام تعبير غامض او غير مباشر بدلا من عبارة يعتقد انها غير سارة او محرجة او مسيئة. (كريستال، ٢٠٠٤: ١٢٨)

يتناول لبحث المطروح مشكلة ماهو الفرق بين التصريح المكبوح وتلطيف العبارة وهل هناك علاقة بينهما وماهي طبيعة ونوع العلاقة؟

ان هذا الاختلاف يوضح عن طريق استعمال أمثلة مختلفة ومتنوعة لظاهرتي التصريح المكبوح وتلطيف العبارة من خلال امثلة للتخاطب المجتمعي.

يبين البحث ان التصريح المكبوح وتلطيف العبارة كلاهما ظاهرتين مختلفتين ولكن هناك علاقة واضحة بينهما فضلا عن تداخلهما مع بعضهما البعض، هذا وان التصريح المكبوح هو طريقة للتعبير عن تلطيف العبارة وبهذا فان التصريح المكبوح هو جزء من تلطيف العبارة ولكن تلطيف العبارة ليس تصريح مكبوح.

## Introduction

Stylistics is a branch of general linguistics which studies the nature, function, and structures of stylistic device as well as the study of each style of language. The stylistic device is a conscious and intentional literary use of some facts of language (including expressive meaning). Stylistics is a linguistics of the effects of message, the output of act of communication and its attention –compelling function. Understatement is a part of stylistics. Galperin (2017: 10)

Understatement as "a statement which is deliberately weakened to sound ironical or softened to sound more polite" Collin(2017: 2). As well as it is the antonym of hyperbole often used for irony to down play a catastrophe, sometimes they come across as amusing. So, understatement is so diverse as a tool of prose and poetry. (Harper, 2010: 2 and Colston, 2017: 274)

Understatement is a statement that is restrained in ironic contrast to what might have been said. Besides, It is a figure of speech employed by writers or speakers to intentionally make a situation seem less important than it really is. (Examples and definitions of understatement)

In Random House Dictionary (2016) It is a form of irony in which something is intentionally represented as less than it is."e.g. Hank Aaron was a pretty good ball player).

In addition, it can be defined as the act or an instance of stating something in restrained terms, or as less that it is. (Collins, 2012: 1)

## Types of Understatement

There are two types of understatement according to Scott (1951: 166-177)  
1-Litotes: Greek plain, meager. An ironically moderate form of speech. Sometimes a rhetorical understatement in which a negative is substituted for positive remark. " A citizen of no mean city" for "a great city".

e.g. "I praise you "not certainly says "I blame you".

2-Meiosis: Greek, lessening, It means the use of understatement to give the impression that a thing is less in size and importance that it really is. It is often applied in the negative form and is commonly used in colloquial English, That was some opera the royal procession was rather good (ibid).



## The types of Understatement

### 1-Ironic Understatement:

It means the response minimizes the magnitude of the situation: For example, Imagine that your friend has just failed a test. An intense response would be:

e.g. Wow ! that's a terrible score! What are you going to do to improve your grade in the class now?

e.g. That grades not so bad. If could have been worse.

### 2- Comedic Understatement:

Serious statements can become funny through the use of understatement. e.g. in comedic movies, a series of unfortunate events will often happen. Once happy couple are arguing, their car breaks down, and as they get out of the car to see what's wrong, it begins to rain heavily a proper response would be:

e.g. This is horrible ! What else could go wrong? We have terrible luck!

A comedic understatement would be:

Looks like we've got a bit of trouble on our hands, ha-ha?

### 3-Modest Understatement:

After doing an amazing, it is tempting to brag or outwardly celebrate. Using understatement, though, can allow one to remain modest.

e.g. upon winning a race, a prideful runner would say:

I won the race! I can't believe I did so well!

A modest runner would use understatement to modestly.

Accepting the win:

e.g. I did pretty well. I'm happy that I improved my time.

### 4- Polite Understatement:

Difficult situations can sometimes result in impolite comments for example, when in a heated disagreement, one may say:

e.g. I'm never going to agree with you ! you're completely wrong about this.

Using understatement, though, can allow one to remain polite:

I think we have different opinions on this subject

Hubler considered it as a hedge in English.

## Functions of Understatement

- 1-Showing Politeness
- 2-Emphasizing the enormity of a problem.
- 3-Avoiding hurting the reader's feeling and making the hearer sulky .
- 4-Criticizing someone (specially the people not higher rank and position in the society ) subtly .
- 5-Being a subtle form of sarcasm .
- 6-Functioning as a metaphor .
- 7-Making the problems less serious.
- 8- Commonest ways to express understatement. (Ju Hong, 2000: 4) and (Galperin, 2017:18-19).

## How to Express or to Use Understatement?

There are three commonest ways to express understatements:

- 1-Using "negative words" like 'no' , 'not' 'none ' 'never' negative expression to express the affirmative content .
- 2-Using "modal verbs" and bare-infinitive or the forms of infinitive " to avoid direct statement or to answer indirectly .
- 3-Using down toners like "a bit ", almost .....kind of, rather, pretty, scarcely, quite, something sort of to minimize the importance. (Ju Hong, 2000: 5); (Colston, 2009: 274); Colston and O'Brien, 2000:4).

## Understatement and Litotes:

According to Galperin (2017:16) litotes is a stylistic device consisting of peculiar use of negative construction.

The negation plus noun or adjectives serve to establish a positive feature in a person or thing .This positive feature, however, is somewhat diminished in quality as compared with a synonymous expression making a straightforward assertion of the positive feature . It is a figure of speech in which the speaker either strengthens or weakens the emphasis of a claim by denying its opposite.



Litotes can involve intensification, but understatements are weakened statements. In some situations, we can use litotes as understatement, but not all litotes is understatement and not all understatements are litotes. Another difference between them is that litotes consists of a peculiar use of negative constructions, but there are many ways to express understatements such as using down toners or using modal verbs (Dictionary Definitions, 2016:1). Examples of understatement (2016: 2); (Louis, 2010:294) and (Colston, 2015: 2).

## The Features of Understatement

### 1-Syntactic Features

Understatements are formed syntactically and they can be expressed by all parts of speech and it comes from many structural levels. They can be presented under the form of phrasal structures, namely, noun phrases, verb phrases, adjective phrases and adverb phrases . Apart from these structures, sentential structures include understatements expressed through affirmative structures and negative ones. (Louis, 2010: 294) and (Colston, 2015: 2)

1-Phrasal structure:

a-Adjective phrase:

1-less + adj.

2-Premodifier + adj.

b-Adverb phrases

Adverb + verb phrase

c-Verb phrases

verb + NP

verb + to infinitive

verb + adj. phrase

v + p, p.

It can be seen that in many cases , the verb in these understatements modals is "seem"

2- Sentential structures:

a-Affirmative structures .

b-Negative structures. (ibid)



## 2- Semantic Features of Understatement.

Understatements can be categorized into sex groups:

- a-Understatements expressing poverty.
- b- Understatements expressing gloomy state.
- c- Understatements expressing conflict.
- d-Understatements expressing insaneness.
- e- Understatements expressing incapableness or weakness .
- f-Understatements expressing prayer.

4-Pragmatic features of understatements:

- Avoiding having clash with politicians or someone
- Showing tactfulness.
- Avoiding losing affection with others. (Louis, 2010: 245).

## Euphemism

The word euphemism is first recorded in English in Thomas Blount's *Glossographia* (1956) where it is defined as a good or favorable interpretation of a bad word. It is derived from the Greek word that means "use of an auspicious word for an inauspicious one and "fair of speech" (Enright, 1985: 13)

A euphemism is a word or phrase that replaces a word thought to be taboo. It provides a means of avoiding scary or unpleasant (unpleasant) subjects. It is a roundabout expression to which speakers of a language are constantly forced to use because it is socially acceptable. (Trask, 1996: 39)

Crystal (1992: 128) states that euphemism is the use of a vague or indirect expression in place of one which is thought to be unpleasant, embarrassing, or offensive.

In Concise Oxford Dictionary (2015: 253), it is defined as the substitution of mild or vague round about expression for harsh, blunt or direct one.

In Webster's Unabridged Dictionary (2001:668) language is used to avoid saying certain things that may be disapproving or offensive to people in their culture. This avoidance can be carried out by the use of a special speech style that includes nice (or neutral) words, word order, pronunciation, etc., that can be fit the context of situation in which the



addresser finds him/herself . This speech style is euphemistic and hence it can be described as the good and peaceful bank of a river to which people almost always resort. This is to avoid being in the unpleasant, violent and rugged bank of the river that represents taboo". The substitution of mild of a mild , indirect , vague expression for one thought to be offensive, harsh, or blunt".

Euphemism, which is the synonym of the word 'noa' is of Greek origin (euphemismos) that means speaking well of something or someone.

In rhetoric, it is the use of a mild, comforting, or evasive expression toned down statement that takes the place of one that is taboo, negative, offensive, or too direct. (Warner, 196: 19 ; (Wahba, 1974: 153); (McArthur,1992: 386) and (Aschholz et.al, 2000: 612)

Euphemism is classified into two general types:

1-Positive Euphemism .

2-Negative euphemism. ( Rawson, 1995: 1)

1- Positive Euphemism: inflates and amplifies the point in question, making the euphemized items seems altogether finer and more important than they really are, as in the improved occupational titles which comfort the feelings of the workers by elevating their job status "access controller " for doorman , "associate " for salesclerk , "working girl" for whore, etc. Positive euphemisms also include personal honorific terms such as "colonel", the honourable, captain, and major.

2-Negative Euphemism: deflates ,diminishes or lessens the point in question, and hence they are defensive in nature, offsetting the power of taboo terms. The negative, defensive euphemism are extremely old.

e.g. The tiger is alluded to as the striped one. (ibid)

Scott (1980: 100 ) defines it as to speak words of good omen; eu –well. The substitution of a less distasteful word or phrase for a more truthful but more offensive one. It is often extended with circum location. Examples:

1-He passed away peacefully, for," he died "

2-Discord fell on the music of his soul;

While Lyons (1991: 151) states that euphemism is the avoidance of tabooed words has been in changing the descriptive meaning of words.

The taboo word will be abandoned and a harmless substitute a euphemism , (its origin is from Greek , eu means "well "and pheme" speaking. (Brook: 1940).

## Conclusion

- 1- Understatement is a figure of speech employed by writers or speakers to make a situation seem less important than it really is While euphemism is the use of a vague or indirect expression in place of one which is thought to be unpleasant, embarrassing, or offensive. (Crystal: 1992: 128)
- 2- The Types of Understatement are ironic, comedic, modest and polite understatements as well as it can be divided into litotes and meiosis according to Scott (1959:166-177), but euphemisms are of two types positive euphemism and negative euphemism according to Ransom (1995: 1).
- 3- The Function of Understatements are:
  - a-To show politeness and euphemising the enormity of a problem and more to avoid hurting the feeling of reader as well as to criticize someone subtly, to function as a metaphor while the functions of euphemism are:
  - a-To make the emphasized items seem altogether finer and more important than they really are.
  - b-To avoid the taboo words.
  - c-To substitute the offensive word with the more polite and more acceptable than the first one .
- 4-Understatement is the antonym of hyperbole while euphemism is the antonym of taboo .
- 5- Examples of understatement:

That was some opera , "the royal procession was rather good"

When someone asks his friend to describe someone who is very short and he says, he is not tall. (polite)

While euphemism such as untruthful for a liar, unwise for stupid, throw up for ' vomit ' or pre-owned car for used car.
- 6-There are two negative central points about euphemistic expression generally creates ambiguity such as (Jees) for (Jesus).



7-Euphemistic expressions create distortion to the truth such as "Golly for God"

8- According to Brook (1958: 183), he considers the meiosis which is a type of understatement as one of the several euphemistic ways that are employed by the decent, polite speakers i.e., the replacement of a word by the negation of its antonym, which is regarded as a common form of euphemism and known as double negation such as not understatement word, as in "not unkindly" for kindly, "not unjustifiably" for "justifiably". In that "meiosis" that is the employment of negating form of a word to deflate or inflate the reality of another word by making it less or more important than it actually is.

Here from the researchers' point of view, they notice that Euphemism is a phenomenon that overlaps with the phenomenon of understatement and one can say sometimes that understatement can be part of Euphemism but euphemism is not part of understatement .

9- Both of them create distortion to the truth.

Such as Golly for God, but euphemism depends upon the technique of adaptation . While understatement depends upon the thoughts and style of the tone of the speaker.

Finally, understatement and Euphemism, both of them are different phenomena, but there is a clear relation between them and they overlap with each other and part of understatement is a way of expressing Euphemism, thus, understatement is a part of Euphemism but Euphemism is not understatement that can be an effective tool in speech to convey a number of feelings and elicit an immediate emotional response in the readers, and Euphemism is used to present a situation, a person or an object in a more agreeable, more reassuring or politer than would be afforded by the hard glare of reality or by crude , direct definition as well as used to emphasize the avoiding things that are generally unacceptable in polite conversation.

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