A Pragmatic Study of Metaphorical Euphemistic Expressions in Shakespeare's Hamlet

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Abstract

Euphemism is a common language phenomenon used to replace a direct, offensive, annoying, and prohibited word or expression with a roundabout, inoffensive, pleasant, and acceptable one to save both the speaker's and hearer's face or any third party from any loss. The purpose of the present study is to pragmatically examine the metaphorical euphemistic expressions in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. It aims to find the metaphorical euphemistic expressions and how the writer employs them in his play. The researcher adopts Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle, Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Model, and Goffman's (1962) Notion of Face. A qualitative approach is adopted in the current paper. The researcher uses the text, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as the instrument of the study. A discourse analysis method is followed in this paper. The findings show that Shakespeare utilizes various types of metaphorical euphemistic expressions in the play such as sex, religion, and disease. Moreover, Shakespeare does not observe the conversational maxims, yet he observes politeness and face. It is hoped that this study will be of some value to those who are interested in linguistics, literature, sociology, and pragmatics.

Keywords

Metaphor, euphemism, taboos, pragmatics, cooperative principle, politeness, face

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Introduction

Rawson sees euphemism as "mild, agreeable, or roundabout words used in place of coarse, painful, or offensive ones" (1). In addition to that, Diebold defines it as "the means by which a disagreeable, offensive, or fear-instilling matter is designated with an indirect or softer term" (289), such as the expressions "'mad', 'elderly people', 'die', and 'sexual intercourse' are euphemized as 'underdeveloped', 'senior citizens', 'pass away', and 'sleep' respectively."

Euphemism is used to conceal taboo or undesirable terms and save the face of the others. This is assured by Allan and Burridge (qtd in Jamet) who define euphemism by referring to the notion of 'face': "A euphemism is used as an alternative to dispreferred expression, in order to avoid possible loss of face:

either one's face or, through giving offensive, that of the audience, or of some third party" (3).

Metaphor is the most central device in the formation of euphemism for taboo topics (Crespo 111), "in which one thing, idea, or action is referred to by a word or expression normally denoting another thing, idea, or action, so as to suggest some common quality shared by the two" (Baldick 153). Crespo (104) points out that metaphorization gives rise to socially tolerable substitutions. To illustrate "life is journey', 'go to a better place', and 'go to other side' are metaphors for death" (Duda 316-7).

To understand the meaning of metaphorical euphemisms with no context is not straightforward. Thus, context provides a key part to fully comprehend metaphorical euphemism. Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness and Grice's (1975) cooperative principle's maxims of conversation (quantity, quality, relevance, and manner) are interlinked in the sense that to employ metaphorical euphemistic words, someone needs to break the conversational maxims generating implicature. Consequently, from a pragmatic perspective, euphemism mirrors the natural interconnection between the conversational maxims and politeness. The current paper is a pragmatic attempt to address the metaphorical euphemistic expressions in Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* in which the characters use numerous sorts of metaphorical euphemisms for various reasons. Furthermore, the study aims to pragmatically investigate how these characters follow politeness and face of others and do not follow the conversational maxims. The following questions represent the problem of the study:

1. What are the metaphorical euphemisms in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*?
2. How does the writer employ metaphorical euphemistic expressions in *Hamlet*?
3. How does the writer observe politeness and break the conversational maxims in *Hamlet*?

1. What is Taboo?

The word 'taboo' comes from the Polynesian word 'tabu'. According to Polynesia languages, taboo obviously refers to "'to forbid', 'forbidden', and can be applied to any sort of prohibition. A rule of etiquette, an order issued by a chief, an injunction to children not to meddle with the possessions of their elders, may all be expressed by the use of the word tabu." (Radcliffe-Brown 5). Wardhaugh sees taboos as follows:

Taboo is the prohibition or avoidance in any society of behavior believed to be harmful to its members in that it would cause them anxiety, embarrassment, or shame. It is extremely strong politeness constraints. Consequently, so far as language is concerned, certain things are not to be said or certain objects can be referred to only in certain circumstances (239).

Taboos come out of societal restraints on the person's demeanour where it may lead to distress, hurt or damage. Individuals face metaphysical danger when

they deal with holy individuals, things and spots; they confront concrete threat from dominant people, unsafe beings and illness. "A person's soul or bodily effluvia may put him/her at metaphysical, moral or physical risk, and may contaminate others; a social act may breach constraints on polite behaviour." Violations of taboo words may cause disease or loss of life, and the minor forfeits of physical penalty, imprisonment, societal isolation or just refusal. Even an unintentional infringement taboo endangers disapproval and condemnation; commonly, persons evade taboo expressions just in case they have former intentions to infringe taboos. (Allan and Burridge 1)

1.1 Taboo Topics

According to Wardhaugh, various taboo topics are found in everyday life. Generally, they are sex, death, pregnancy, religion, disease and some others.

A. Sex

"All sex is subject to taboos and censoring, but the taboos on male homosexuality and 'unfaithful' wives have been strongest" (Allan and Burridge 145). The sex topic is a key attention in the lives of people and is possible to stimulate humiliation. Sexuality is mirrored in the awfully high-level of synonymity in the English language for genital organs and sexual intercourse (Crespo 96; Enright 55). For example, the body parts connected to sexual topics such as "penis' (tool), 'cunt' (pussy) and 'breast' (vital statistic)" (Enright 66-7; Rawson 227), and prostitutions, e.g., 'working girls'(bitches) and 'fancy house' (brothel) (Rawson 1).

B. Pregnancy

Algeo and Pyles (215) assure that the word 'pregnant' was not mentioned in a well-mannered company. To illustrate, in the Victorian age, persons choose to say "she is in an interesting condition to be pregnant" (Hughes 481). In addition, mild words for illegal children "are 'catch colt" (Hendrickson 158), and "little newcomer" that echo a reluctance to speak barely about gestation and childbirth (Rawson 35).

C. Death

Aubed (80) and Gomaa and Shi (1) agree that in every culture and nearly every language, death is an extremely serious and dreadful topic people endeavor to evade any reference to. This is stated by Allan and Burridge (222), who believe that death can be "a fear-based taboo". To exemplify, 'he has gone to a 'better country', 'count' (Holder 26-86), "he 'answered the call' and 'at rest' are kind words for 'death" (Enright 30-1).

D. Disease

Allan and Burridge (234) state that in most civilizations, allusions to illnesses are restricted; they are coloured with inoffensive words. This is due to the fact that diseases are caused by the acts of awful spirits or individuals, their relationship with loss of life, or simply their inherent offensiveness. For

illustration, 'Venereal disease or Infection' is a taboo that is substituted with "catch a packet and catch the boat up" (Holder 57).

E. Religion

Hughes (201) warns that it is prohibited to utter the word of God because is believed to be one of taboos in various convictions, particularly by Christians. "The Old Testament ban against taking the Lord's name in vain (the Third Commandment) has been continuous to be deemed as a critical, religious and moral contamination." To illustrate, religious vows such as "begorra, 'by Gum', and 'by George' are agreeable replacements for by God" (Enright 19).

2. Conversational Implicature

Paul Grice, who contributed largely in the field of pragmatics, (1975) presents the theory of conversational implicature. Levinson refers to it as a particular kind of "pragmatic inference, which cannot be believed of as semantic (i.e. as pertaining to the meanings of words, phrases and sentences)" (167) due to their dependence immediately on specific circumstantial expectations regarding the collaboration of participants in a dialogue.

Grice suggests "the Cooperative Principle and a group of conversational maxims". Verschueren and Ostman (102-3) argue that Gricean cooperative principle pay attention the idea that people are intrinsically "rational and cooperative". Grice sees the Cooperative Principle as: "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (26). Besides, Grice offers a group of definite maxims that talkers are anticipated to pursue in a dialogue:

1. "The Maxim of Quantity: Be informative: A. Make your contribution as informative as is required and B. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required."
2. "The Maxim of Quality: Be truthful: A. Do not say what you believe to be false and B. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence."
3. "The Maxim of Relation (sometimes called 'relevance'): Be relevant."
4. "The Maxim of Manner: Be perspicuous: A. Avoid obscurity of expression, B. Avoid ambiguity, C. Be brief and D. Be orderly."   (Grice 26-7)

2.1 Violating Conversational Maxims

Talkers looking not to observe the maxims but supposing listeners to consider the covert meaning, Gricean maxims are violated (Cutting 37). Thus, although maxims are flouted literally, the listener is expected to presume these maxims, or at minimum, the whole Cooperative Principle, is observed implicitly (Grice 33).

"The speaker who breaks the maxim of quantity looks to be more or less informative while the talker who flouts the maxim of quality says something that plainly does not denote what s/he thinks" (ibid.). When a talker does not observe the relevance maxim, s\he supposes that the listener can think of the utterance and create the connection between the new utterance and the former

one(s). Lastly, breaking the manner maxim by seeming vague, people are regularly endeavouring to disregard others (Cutting 37).

3. Politeness and Taboo Words

It is like a failure looking for taboo language in work on politeness because it has a adjacent link with impoliteness. However, it is not unconscionable to estimate there to be some search of polite ways of dealing with taboo topics in language (Allan 29).

Politeness, which is a pragmatic strategy, is a way to show consciousness of "another person's face" (Yule 60). Leech points out that "politeness means to reduce the expression of beliefs" (81), that can be unfavourable to the hearer and simultaneously maximize the expression of beliefs, which are appropriate to the listener. Similarly, Lakoff (qtd in Fraser 223), sees politeness as the evasion of offence. The indirectness given by means of some strategies play role in evading offensiveness and assuring politeness in its two levels: "positive (oriented towards the public self-image and social prestige of the participants) and negative (related to the interlocutor's freedom of action and freedom from imposition in the communicative encounter)" (Brown and Levinson 27).

4. Face Theory and Taboo Words

The Face Theory suggested by Goffman, is a central component in analyzing a dialogue. He (5) pens: "the term face may be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact".

Brown and Levinson, who adapt Goffman's face concept, see it as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (61). "It alludes to that emotional and public sense of self that everybody has and supposes everyone else to perceive" (Yule). Face has two dimensions: "positive face (identified with the individual's desire to be positively regarded in social context) and negative face (concerned with the participant's desire to be autonomous and free from imposition" (60).

Brown and Levinson (67) see that referring to taboo subjects, in addition to those that are unsuitable in the situation that when the speaker shows that s\he does not esteem the hearer's esteems and does not dread the hearer's dreads) threat positive face.

Crespo (83) shows that some strategies act on those dimensions of face: firstly, they respond to the talker's necessity to diminish probable societal clashes, that could change the talker's respect; secondly, they presume a means to reduce a danger to the speaker's self-sufficiency.

5. Methodology

Dealing with words and expressions, the researcher adopts a descriptive qualitative approach to gather and examine the data which are extracted from a

literary text; *Hamlet* which is one of the famous Shakespeare's plays. Patton (2015) argues that qualitative research consists of gathering quotes from individuals, demonstrating them, and considering what they mean. Moreover, Vanderstoep and Johnston (2009) argue that the purpose of qualitative method is "more descriptive than predictive" (p. 167). The aim is to understand the situations deeply. Therefore, the study follows an interpretive qualitative approach because the researcher gathers the data from words and expressions and examines them to elicit meaning rather than focusing on statistical data; a quantitative approach. Furthermore, the researcher descriptively and qualitatively analyzes these words to designate and explain them based on Grice's (1975) cooperative principle, Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, and Goffman's (1962) notion of face.

5.1 Instrumentation

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) believe that in qualitative inquiry, the investigator is the main instrument for collecting and analyzing data. Because comprehending is the aim of this study, the human instrument, that can be directly reactive and adaptive, appears to be the perfect means of gathering and examining data. In addition, the data are taken from documents; a preexisting material. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) claim it is possible that all kinds of documents help the researchers reveal meaning, enhance comprehension, and uncover understandings related to the problem of the study.

5.2 Techniques of Data Collection and Analysis

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) assure that the researcher's theoretical attitude, the problem and aim of the research, and the selection of the sample determine the techniques of data collection and the particular information deemed to be data in research. Therefore, the researcher does the following procedures: (1) referring to the theoretical literature on euphemism, metaphorical euphemisms, taboo topics, cooperative principle, politeness, and face, (2) reading the text to purposefully select the metaphorical euphemisms that are relevant to the study, (3) re-reading the selected metaphorical euphemistic expressions to carefully examine them according to the adopted theories, (4) pragmatically analyzing the data by applying the theories to answer the research questions, and (5) providing conclusions and some suggestions for further research.

6. Findings

Analyzing the metaphorical euphemistic expressions in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the findings have shown that Shakespeare uses various metaphorical euphemistic expressions that are associated with sex, pregnancy, death, and religion topics. Moreover, applying Grice's (1975) cooperative principle, Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, and Goffman's (1962) notion of face to eight excerpts, the findings reveal that the characters of the play break all Grice's (1975) conversational maxims (quality, quantity, manner, and relevance) for achieving numerous reasons; to show politeness, save the face of others

from any loss, respect the name of God, avoid embarrassment and taboos, and reduce offensiveness. The following is the analysis and explanation of the eight situations from the play by applying the above models. These situations are chosen selectively to cover taboo topics and thus the data are saturated; no need to include other repetitive situations to avoid redundancy.

Metaphorical euphemistic expressions that are related to sex

Text (1)

"POLONIUS. Do you know me, my lord?"

"HAMLET. Excellent well; you are fishmonger."

"POLONIUS. Not I, my lord."   (Shakespeare 2. 2.173-175)

Context

The speaker is Hamlet, the prince and the listener is Polonius. Hamlet is there reading a book. Hamlet pretends mad to check out the ghost's claim that "The serpent [Claudius] that did sting thy father's life, Now wears his crown" (Shakespeare 1.5.43-45). Polonius believes Hamlet is insane due to his affection for his daughter Ophelia. Claudius, as Hamlet believes, manipulates Polonius who in turn does so with his daughter for immoral purposes. That is why Hamlet calls Polonius "a fishmonger."

Implicature

From Gricean point of view, Hamlet superficially breaks the maxims of quality and manner when uttering "you're a fishmonger". This flouting is not irrational, but it has a social function to do. Depending on the context, Hamlet implies that Polonius is a man who sells not fish, which is the literal meaning of the utterance, but his daughter for immoral intentions or more specifically *he is like a pimp*. Hamlet euphemizes his utterance to make fun of Polonius, avoiding mentioning an unpleasant expression which threaten the positive face of the listener and the audience. Thus, the face is protected from any damage by this use of metaphorical euphemism.

Text (2)

"HAMLET. That if you be honest and fair, your honesty should"

     "admit no discourse to your beauty."

"OPHELIA. Could beauty, my lord, have better commerce than"

     "with honesty?"

"HAMLET. Ay, truly; for the power of beauty will sooner"

     "transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the"

     "force   of   honesty   can   translate   beauty   into   his   likeness…" (Shakespeare 3.1.108-118)

Context

The speaker is Ophelia whereas the listener is Hamlet. They talk about honesty and honour. Hamlet doubts Ophelia's honesty because of her beauty. He suggests that her virtue should prevent everyone from addressing her beauty since beauty misleads. Ophelia takes him to mean her honesty and her beauty

should never be allowed to have "commerce" with one another. Hamlet responds that beauty will spoil virtue (honesty) than virtue will turn beauty to good ends.

Implicature

According to Grice's theory, Ophelia ostensibly transgresses the maxim of quality when mentioning "…have better commerce…" Despite this visible violation of the maxim, Ophelia is collaborative at a deeper degree. According to context, Ophelia implies *having sexual intercourse* which, when uttered directly, arises a threat to face. That is why it is avoided in this context employing polite and indirect utterance in order to show politeness and save face from any loss.

Text (3)

"HAMLET. We are arrant knaves, all;"

"believe none of us. Go thy ways to anunnery. Where's your father?"

"OPHELIA. At home, my lord"

(Shakespeare 3.1.140-143)

Context

While the speaker is Hamlet, the listener is Ophelia. They talk about honesty and faith. Hamlet talks to Ophelia in a strange manner thinking all women are "breeders of sinners". He wishes he would not have been borne for not taking revenge yet. When he asks her about her father's place, she lies. Thus, Hamlet thinks that her place is in "a nunnery" which was sometimes used in Shakespeare's era to mean 'a brothel' (Rampone 68).

Implicature

Hamlet blatantly breaks the maxim of quality when saying "Go thy ways to a nunnery". Yet he is still cooperative. Depending on the context, Hamlet means that *her place should be in the brothel or whorehouse* because of lying, criticizing these kinds of religious places and comparing them with bad houses. Indeed, Hamlet, euphemizing his utterance with a polite and metaphorical expression and avoiding the explicit mention of these bad houses, minimizes a damage to face. Therefore, politeness arises and face is kept.

Metaphorical euphemistic expressions that are related to pregnancy

Text (4)

"HAMLET. …Have you a daughter?"

"POLONIUS. I have, my lord."

"HAMLET. Let her not walk i' the sun: conception is a blessing,"

" but not as your daughter may conceive:–friend, look to't."

(Shakespeare 2.2. 182-185)

Context

The speaker is Hamlet whereas the listener is Polonius. Hamlet is talking about Ophelia while reading the book. Hamlet still feigns mad making fun of

Polonius by asking him some questions about his daughter Ophelia. Hamlet advises him to take care of her for she may make an illegal relationship.

Implicature

Hamlet seemingly transgresses the maxims of quality when saying "conception is a blessing". However, he is still cooperative to make the conversation successful. Taking context into account, Hamlet conversationally implicates that *pregnancy is blessing* which is welcomed through legal marriage criticizing Polonius' daughter's belief of pregnancy out of marriage. Here, the process of euphemizing serves to avoid mentioning the taboo expression which threatens face. Thus, the use of polite and indirect expression diminishes this threat to face in spite of the visible violation of cooperation.

Metaphorical euphemistic expressions that are related to death

Text (5)

"OPHELIA. [Sings.] … His beard was as white as snow,"

All flaxen was his poll:

He is gone, he is gone,

And we cast away moan:

God ha' mercy on his soul!

"And of all Christian souls, I pray God.–God b' wi' ye." (Shakespeare 4.5.218-223)

Context

While the addresser is Ophelia, the addressees are the king, the Queen, and Laertes. Ophelia laments her father through a sad song. Ophelia starts to sing some songs after her father's murder by her lover's hand, Hamlet. She is traumatized and disappointed for losing both her father and her lover. These are the last lines she speaks before her death.

Implicature

From Gricean perspective, Ophelia literally breaks the quality maxim when saying "He is gone". To put it into context, this obvious non-observance of the maxim gives rise to an implicature that Ophelia conversationally means *he is dead*. In fact, she euphemizes her utterance through metaphor to show politeness and respect to her father which is a sign of solidarity in the family as if her father were in travel. Furthermore, any threat to face is decreased through this way of euphemizing. So, face is upheld over the Cooperative Principle.

Text (6)

"LAERTES. And so have I a noble father lost;"

"A sister driven into desperate terms,–"

"Whose worth, if praises may go back again,"

"Stood challenger on mount of all the age"

"For her perfections:–but my revenge will come"

 (Shakespeare 4.7.25-29)

Context

The addresser is Laertes while the addressee is the king, Claudius. They are talking about Hamlet's murder of Laertes' father Polonius. After Hamlet kills Polonius accidently, Laertes asks the King the reason for letting him go without punishment. Then Laertes, who is in a miserable way, laments his father's loss and his sister's condition which leads her later to make a suicide.

Implicature

From Gricean view, Laertes plainly breaks the maxim of quality when he utters "have I a noble father lost". However, he is still willing to cooperate at a hidden level. The context, taken into consideration, Laertes intends that *his father is dead* which makes him very depressed and disappointed. He avoids the explicit mention of death to show his love, respect and politeness to his father and also to reduce any damage to face which is consequently, is kept from losing using a polite and metaphorical expression.

Text (7)

"Hamlet. …The potent poison quite o'er-crows my spirit:"

"I cannot live to hear the news from England;"

"But I do prophesy the election lights"

"On Fortinbras: he has my dying voice;"

"So tell him, with the occurrents, more and less,"

"Which have solicited.–the rest is silence"

 (Shakespeare 5.2.353-358)

Context

The addresser is Hamlet and the addressee is Horatio. Hamlet is dying. After the end of the duel, Laertes is killed while Hamlet is injured by Laertes' poisonous lethal sword. He gives his will to his friend Horatio that Fortinbras is the next king.

Implicature

Pragmatically speaking, Hamlet explicitly flouts the maxim of quality when saying "the rest is silence". But still, he is collaborative at an implicit degree. According to context, the addressee and others may work out an implicature in this way: *the death is silence* depicting death not that fearful thing which people fear but relaxation. In fact, the idea of death becomes acceptable to these in the earshot and at the same time any threat to face is softened by this process of euphemizing. So, face is preserved from losing in spite of the apparent non-adherence of the maxim.

Metaphorical euphemistic expressions that are related to Religion

Text (8)

"HAMLET. …let us know"

"Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well"

"When our deep plots do pall, and that should teach us"

"There's a divinity that shapes our ends,"

"Rough-hew them how we will"   (Shakespeare 4.2.7-11)

Context

The speaker is Hamlet and the listener is Horatio. Hamlet tells Horatio that he is brave while on the ship to England to see the letters carried by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hamlet knows they have a directive order from Claudius to kill Hamlet when arriving at the beach. He thinks his uncovering of this fact is divine.

Implicature

According to Grice, Hamlet transgresses the maxim of manner when saying the word 'divinity'. The addressee and the audience expect Hamlet to be collaborative and they will attempt to understand his real intentions. Depending on the context, the word 'divinity' refers to God. This is considered blasphemous; "taking the name of God in a vain" (Enright 19). Thus, the process of euphemizing through metaphor serves to avoid offensiveness to the name of God and show respect for Him and the religious sensibilities of others.

Conclusion

The researcher analyzing eight excerpts from the play, argues that Shakespeare uses different metaphorical euphemistic expressions that are related to sex, pregnancy, death, and religion topics. Moreover, applying Grice's (1975) cooperative principle, Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, and Goffman's (1962) notion of face to these excerpts, the conclusions reveal that the characters of the play break all Grice's (1975) conversational maxims (quality, quantity, manner, and relevance) for various reasons; to show politeness, save the face of others from any loss, respect the name of God, avoid embarrassment and taboos, and reduce offensiveness.

This paper is extremely short and limited to Grice's (1975) cooperative principle, Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, and Goffman's (1962) notion of face and the data are eight quotations taken from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Therefore, the researcher recommends future research on other models by applying them to the same or different literary works. The researcher hopes that the current study contributes to the existing literature on euphemisms, taboo topics, and pragmatics. Besides, the findings of the study are beneficial to journalists, teachers, bloggers, literary writers, critics, interviewers, users of social media, and politicians who will be familiar with the various metaphorical expressions that help them speak or write about the unspeakable or unwritable.

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