

Euphemism: As a Cause of Semantic Change

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Abstract

This paper aims at proving that euphemism brings about changes in the meaning of words, which in return, creates new words added to the terminology of the language concern. The present study depends on the assumption that euphemism replaces certain unfavorable term by a favorable one. In tackling euphemism from social, religious, and political spheres. One can conclude that due to cultural factors the process of euphemism is emerged. In other words, taboo words are replaced by euphemistic words for ritual and cultural reasons. In religion, it is shown that there are some words which dogmatically bear fearful or forbidden connotative meaning. They are to be replaced by more pleasant and favorable words to be acceptable. Politically, euphemism is almost used by politicians as a maneuver to hide the truth.

1. Introduction

The study is furnished to prove that euphemism is among the causes which results in changing and creating new meanings of words. The reason behind using the process of euphemism is that certain word has an unfavorable meaning and ritually should be replaced by a favorable word. Also, a given word might become taboo; therefore, it should be replaced by a word which has a favorable and acceptable shed of meaning. This being the case, cultural aspects sometimes oblige the community to change a word for another which is culturally unacceptable.

This paper tackles euphemism from the social, religious, and political aspects which they are, of course, governed dogmatic attitudes of certain communities. The study postulates that euphemism is a process through which a word which has unfavorable connotative meaning is

replaced by a word which has a connotative favorable meaning due to cultural and emotional reasons. Thus, the study assumes that socially, and culturally the word is replaced by another one, for the former has become taboo or it bears an offensive connotative meaning; or brings the feeling of fear or curse to the listener. Religiously, some words carry forbidden connotative meaning, hence they are replaced by more acceptable standardized words. In politics, the process of euphemism is used as a maneuver or lies canceling the truth.

1.1 Status of Euphemism

Etymologically, euphemism is a Greek word which means 'well speaking'. Linguistically, it refers to the practice of referring to something offensive or delicate in terms that makes it sounds more pleasant or becoming than it really is (Leech, 1974: 53). The technique consists of replacing a word which has offensive connotations with another expression. This, in return, makes no overt reference to the unpleasant side of the subject, and even the expression may be a positive misnomer. For example, when a hostess asks a guest whether he would like to wash his hands. In this case, the people find it possible to live with and talk about things which do not shock or disturb them.

In the same way, Stevens and Charles (1966: 132) view euphemism as "a mild word substituted for on which may give offense or which may have strong emotional connotations". Euphemism, however, often demanded in social situations where more direct language may irritate, injure, or offend people. The words 'false teeth', for example, may give discomfort to the wearers of dentures. In fact, there is a point beyond which the use of euphemisms can become a matter of squeamishness or obscuration. To call a 'funeral home' (which is already a euphemism for

'mortuary') a memorial chapel is to tax the afflicted with a mawkish and commercial sentimentalism.

2. Meaning

The term 'meaning' is defined by Hartmann and Stork (1972 : 138) as "the sense that the word or a group of words conveys". The term 'meaning' has caused much controversy both within and outside linguistics. The linguistic approach to meaning aims to study the properties of meaning in a systematic and objective way with reference to many utterances and languages. Thus, this approach is broader than the approach adopted by many logicians and philosophers who have tended to concentrate on a restricted range of sentences (typically, statements, or propositional within a single language (Crystal, 1989 : 100) .

Finch (2000 : 144) states on the other hand, that linguists characteristically differentiate between two complementary approaches to the area of meaning. The first is concerned with the sentence meaning which is the pursuit of semantics. The second is concerned with the utterance meaning which is the pursuit of pragmatics. On the other hand, Crystal (1991 : 190) adds that the topic of meaning in the context of language necessitates reference to non - linguistic factors such as thought, situation, knowledge, intention and use. This, in return, proves that many disciplines of language are involved in the study of meaning along with linguistics such as psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, stylistics and others. Leech (1974 : 11 ff), however, introduces various types of meaning, each tackles a given aspect. The connotative meaning, however, is the most suitable category of Leech`s classifications of meaning to this study.

2.1 Connotative Meaning

Connotation is a term used in semantics as part of a classification of types of meaning as opposed to denotation. Connotation refers to the emotional associations (personal or communal) which are part of the meaning of a linguistic unit, especially a lexical item. For example, the connotation of the lexical item 'december' for the north Europeans might include 'bad weather', 'dark evening', 'parties' or 'Christmas'. Since connotation is concerned with the emotional feeling and associations, the alternative terms for 'connotative meaning' include Affective meaning and Emotive meaning (see Lyons 1977b : Ch.7), (Crystal , 1991 : 66).

Leech (1974 : 14) points out that the connotative meaning is peripheral compared with the conceptual meaning for connotations are relatively unstable, i.e., they vary considerably according to culture, historical period, the experience and beliefs of the individual. Moreover, connotative meaning is indeterminate and open-ended in a sense in which conceptual meaning is not. Also, connotative meaning is open-ended in the same way as the knowledge and beliefs of the individual about the universe are open-ended. Stevens and Charles (1966 : 124) add that sometimes various people attach different connotative values to the same word. The term 'chair', for instance, can evoke one kind of emotional response from a senator who has just been asked to chair an important committee. And another is entirely different from a death-row prisoner's chair.

3. Culture - Bound ness

The term 'Culture-boundness' refers to terms which are exist in one culture, but they are neither referentially comprehensible nor linguistically replaceable, i.e., they have no one-to-one equivalent or zero equivalent (Rabin, 1958 : 127). Since each community is mostly distinguished by having certain customs and traditions which are not found in another culture. This, in turn, shows that due to certain traditions, there might be

words which are counted taboo because they have unpleasant connotations against the traditions or customs of that community. Therefore, it is necessary to replace them by words which have more pleasant connotations.

In British English, for example, children are taught not to use 'she' to an adult female in her presence because it is considered as an offense (Leech, 1981 : 28). Fromkin and Rodman (1989 : 279) add that in England the word 'bloody' is considered as a taboo word because it originally refers to the blood of Christ. On the other hand, the words 'hell' and 'damn' are changed to 'heck' and 'darn', believing that this linguistic change might reduce or shave the impact of the powers that would result upon uttering them.

Semantic changes of words can also be motivated by verbal taboo which means the tendency which avoids making references to certain things. Thus, it might be observed that verbal taboo is present in all cultures. For example, many people in Britain and America have taboos about matters such as sex and excretion which are replaced by euphemisms for instance, the word 'toilet' is replaced by amore favorable word 'bath-room'. Both 'bathroom' and 'toilet' are, in turn, replaced by ridiculous euphemisms like 'powder room' and 'little boy's room' (Traugott and Pratt, 1980 : 104). Recently, the French authorities have replaced the English borrowings such as 'week-end', and 'parking' (in the meaning of parking lot) by words such as 'weekend' and 'drugstore' with French equivalents (Ibid).

3.1 Social Euphemism

The existence of taboo words or taboo concepts or even a phone stimulates the creation of euphemisms. Euphemism is a word or phrase that replaces a taboo word or serves to avoid frightening or unpleasant

subjects (Fromkin and Rodman, 1989 : 280). In Zulu, for example, it is reported that a wife is not allowed to use a word carrying [z] because it is a taboo sound and bringing bad omen. Therefore, the woman is not able to use a word like 'amanzi' meaning 'water' unless she converts it into a form which has no such taboo /z/ saying 'a mandabi' meaning 'water'. Thus, it is quite clear that as a result to a taboo sound, a new word is created which is considered a kind of euphemism (Trudgill, 1973 : 81).

Trudgill (Ibid) further says that if a woman wants to say 'my brother' she says 'icibausi', whereas a male speaker should say 'tsaruki' which can be considered as gender euphemism. Once more, another word is created due to gender taboo signifier or signified that dominate the Chiquito people, an American Indian language of Bolivia. Culturally, many southern Americans avoid using the word 'bull' in polite speech, replacing it by a euphemism such as 'he-cow' or 'male beast'. Another example, in Lappish and Yakuts, the name of the animal 'bear' is replaced by such euphemistic phrases 'our lord' or 'good father' (Crystal 1989 : 8).

The fact that there are some words which have negative connotative meanings and they consequently should be replaced by words which have more pleasant or acceptable connotative meanings is proved. A distinguished negro sociologist tells of an incidence in his adolescence when he was hitchhiking far from home in regions where negroes are hardly ever seen. He was adopted by extremely kind white couple. However, they kept calling him 'little nigger' - a fact which upset him profoundly. He finally got up courage to ask the man not to call him by that insulting term:

“Who's insult in' you, son?” Said the man.

“You are, sir - that name you're always calling me”.

“What name?”

“Uh ... you know”.

“I ain't calling'. You no names, son”.

“I mean your calling me ‘nigger’.”

“Well, What's insult in' about that? You are a nigger, ain't you?

(cited in Leech, 1974 : 52)

Apparently, the word 'nigger' is considered a taboo word because it has an offensive connotative meaning against the blacks. Thus, the word 'negro' is considered a euphemistic word for the blacks as it is compared to the word 'nigger' which should not be used to call by it the Blacks (Leech, Ibid). In the same respect, even the word 'negro' is less used in media nowadays looking for a more pleasant word. Therefore, the word 'color man' is used widely in media for this word is considered a kind of euphemism.

In many societies, because death is fearful, there are a number of euphemisms related to this subject. For example, people no longer use the word 'to die' or 'died' because it brings about an unpleasant connotative meaning to them; therefore, the words 'pass on' or 'pass away' are used instead of 'died' which have a less fearful connotative meaning. Fromkin and Rodman (1989 : 280) add those who take care of passed away people are more likely to be called 'funeral directors' than to be called 'morticians' or 'undertakers'. Similarly, the word 'personnel' is used instead of 'manpower', 'nurturing' is used instead of 'mothering', 'chair' or 'moderator' is used instead of 'chairman'. Terms like 'postal worker', 'fire fighter' and 'public safety man' are replaced by mailman, fireman, and 'policeman' which have a more prestige than the formers (Ibid : 285).

In Australia, the words 'urinate' and 'have intercourse' are replaced by a considerable list of euphemisms:

Urine: drain the dragon
 syphon the python
 water the horse
 squeeze the lemon
 drain the spuds
 writing the rattle snake
 shake hands with wife's best friend
 (cited in Fromkin and Rodman, 1989 : 281).

have intercourse: shag
 root
 crack a fat
 dip the wick
 play hospital
 hide the ferret
 have a north west cocktail
 (cited in Fromkin and Rodman,
 1989 : 281).

These euphemisms show that a word or phrase has a linguistic connotative meaning, reflecting attitudes, emotions, value judgments, and the words that the people please them. Further, the word 'lavatory' privy, 'water-closet', 'toilet cloak room', 'rest room', comfort station. The word 'comfort station' is favoured in America. On the other hand, Stevens and Charles (1966 ; 125) indicate that people often create new words with neutral or favorable connotations which serve as synonyms for words which have developed unfavorable connotations. For example, an auto dealer sells 'preowned cars' instead of the word 'second hand cars'. A 'janitor' calls himself a 'custodian', a worker who is fired chooses to say 'terminated' or 'non-reappointed' instead of saying 'fired' or 'canned'. Pyles and Alygeo (1981 : 38) add that the word 'carbageman' the man who

collects rubbish, in Britain is replaced by a more favorable word 'sanitary engineer' in order to avoid offending him. Stevens and Charles (Ibid : 133) further say that advertisers frequently use euphemisms to deflect a customer's attention from the less attractive features of a product. For example, 'beer and liquor' are referred to as 'packaged spirits', 'plastic products' are called 'polyethelen', a 'coal furnace' is dignified by the label 'bituminous thermal mechanism'. Advertisers also use euphemisms to enhance the value of their products. For examples a 'bar of soap' becomes a 'beauty bar', an 'air-conditioned house' is replaced by 'autmnbreezed house', and a 'record player' is replaced by a 'home entertainment center'.

3.2 Religious Euphemism

Due to the religious conflict among some countries, it is safe to say that there are words which are considered euphemisms in one religion and might be considered taboo in another. For example, the word 'jihad' is completely a euphemistic word for it is taken from the verse of the Holly Qura'an. Contrarily, Jews and Christians call this word 'terrorism' for this word is meant to fight them if they attack Muslims. This process of changing the meaning of words is called 'dyseuphemism', (the opposite process of euphemism). For Leech (1974 : 55) this process of dyseuphemism is called 'snarl word' which means "instead of maximizing the unpleasant associations of a term, one tries to purge the subject of its damaging affective associations". Consequently, for Muslims the word 'fighting' is replaced by a more euphemistic word 'jihad' or (أنفال), whereas for Jews and Christians, the euphemism of this word 'jihad' is 'terrorism'.

On the other hand, the word 'معاشرة', 'love making' in Arabic is better replaced by the words 'حرث', and 'تكاح' which are taken from the verse of the Holly Qura'an. Thus, these two words do not embarrass Muslims when they use them in a public or formal speech for they are

considered euphemisms. In English, many euphemistic words are used instead of the word 'love making' which blatantly bears an abusive connotative meaning. Of these words 'romantic love', 'friendship love' ... etc. which might be observed in the fictional genre. In Iraq, recently, 'عباد الشمس' the expression, 'the sun's prayer' planet is replaced by a more acceptable word 'sun flower', (زهرة الشمس). Because the former expression is religiously forbidden referring to a worship other than almighty Allah.

The Holly Qura'an uses many euphemisms indicating the idea of death instead of the word itself death which brings about fear when it is uttered. Thus, the word 'death' is replaced by more pleasant words such as 'رحل الى جوار ربه' 'انتقل الى مثواه الاخير' 'توفى', 'قضى نحبه' of course, these words are entirely used for those whom Allah is satisfied, while snarl words are used to address those who are unbelievers. Traugott and Pratt (1981 : 104) further say that instead of mentioning the word 'death', it is better to be substituted by idioms such as 'pass on', 'go to our reward', and the jocular expression 'kick the bucket'.

Further, the process of euphemism is very important in translation especially for the Arabic translators. For instance, in translating English films-scripts, the Arabic translator might come across the expression 'oh, jesus', since the translator is Muslim, he should translate it into Arabic as 'يا الله' not 'يا المسيح' because from Islamic point of view it is totally forbidden to say 'يا المسيح'. It is also noted that the Arabic translators sometimes translate the expression 'fuck you' into Arabic as 'اللعة عليك'. The expression 'fuck you' has a very abusive connotative meaning if it is translated literally but if it is translated as 'اللعة عليك' it could give less effective meaning than the former. Once more, the expression 'son of bitch'

is translated by Arabic translators into Arabic as 'جبان' in order to avoid abusive words (Ibid.).

3.3 Political Euphemism

Politics carries an ample flux of terminology. After the world war II different items were coined and used in politics as well as in the diplomatic language. Accordingly, politicians frequently use the process of euphemism in order to cancel the truth which, in return, makes them run out their wishes. The most prominent example depicting euphemism is that after the world war II, most of the states started to change the phrase 'Ministry of war' into 'Ministry of Defence'. Thus, this change might give the impression that this state is not aggressive or at least it keeps defending itself against any foreign aggression.

On the other hand, Leech (1974 : 54) states that in politics many terms are used in referring to economically less favored countries in the world, such countries are no longer referred to as 'backward' or 'undeveloped' countries. But as a kind of euphemism, nowadays these countries are called 'developing' countries, 'less developed' countries or 'emergent' countries. Moreover, associations are more obviously chosen for purpose of making a political effect such as the word 'apartheid' which means 'separateness', it is considered as euphemism for 'racial discrimination' or the 'color bar' because these terms cause racial problems particularly in the American society (Leech, Ibid).

Further, Mey (1993 : 317) cites an interview with U.S. Army Speaker who was interviewed on the national Public television about the role of the US military forces in the invasion of Panama for the journalists accused the American forces of destroying street after street by throwing hand grenades and incendiary bombs into each house as they went along; therefore, he states:

'No, the military folks would not do a thing like that ... I can not really recall having seen any evidence of military folks being engaged in operations like burning down houses'.

(Cited in Mey, 1993 : 317)

It can be noted that the speaker uses the phrase 'military folks' instead of using the phrase 'military forces'. This proves that the phrase 'military folks' is used euphemistically because to say 'military forces' means fighting or violence. Besides, the word folk means a group of military men coming for help not fighting. Therefore, the military speaker tries to cancel the truth by resorting to the process of euphemism. Also, the phrase 'military folks' gives the connotation of not being hostile or aggressive.

The word violence carries a strong effective connotative meaning which in terms of political activities means a physical force or conflict. Accordingly, The Guardian newspaper reported on the 2nd September in 1969 that someone called Mr. O'Sullivan was arrested trying to steal arms from a factory in Dagenham. When he was asked whether he was a 'militant' O'Sullivan replied that he did not know what the word meant. Hence, he went on saying: 'if it means using violence, I would not agree. I would prefer to use the word force (cited in Leech. 1974 : 57).

From this extract, it is safe to say that O'Sullivan purely indulges himself in the process of euphemism using 'force' which roughly is a more pleasant word than violence. On the other hand, the word has a less effective political meaning than violence. If this situation, in fact is compared to 'nowadays' situations it would be possible to say that the words 'violence' and 'terrorism' are similar, i.e., they have a strong connotative meaning unlike 'force' which is used in the military situations or armies (Leech, 1974 : 57).

Conclusion

Throughout writhing this paper, it has been shown that euphemism is a process of changing the meanings of words which also leads to coin new words. The process of euphemism seems to be important to the users of a language because emotionally, it helps the speakers out of certain chaotic situations socially, religiously, and politically. However, it is proved that in politics, euphemism helps the politician to play with words by changing a truth into a lie and vice versa. Religiously, euphemism is used to replace forbidden terms by acceptable words, particularly words of daily use. Moreover, euphemism is used in religion to avoid triggering a

conflict between religions and dogmas. On the other hand, euphemism is widely used in social matters. Thus, mostly, euphemism is used in order to avoid unpleasant words, which in return, keeps good ties and relationships among the people of a community.

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