

A Study on Euphemism of *the Desperate Housewives* from the Perspective of Pragmatics

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Abstract:

Euphemism is a common linguistic phenomenon as well as a cultural phenomenon in society. As a kind of “lubricant” of language, euphemism is an essential approach for people to moderate interpersonal relationship by using circuitous and implicit language. Different applications of the euphemisms reflect various culture background, and specific use of the euphemisms corresponding to respective context. Therefore, the studying of English euphemism from pragmatic perspective plays an important role in cross-cultural communication and promoting mutual cultural understanding. The current research conducts a case study of the application of euphemism in details and analyzes the pragmatic functions of euphemism. The research combines English euphemism with Politeness and Cooperative Principle to illustrate why people like using euphemism and how euphemism violates these two principles.

Key words: Euphemism; Pragmatics; Cooperative Principle; Politeness Principle; Desperate Housewives

I. Introduction

Euphemism comes from society and strongly reflects social and cultural values; it is widely and flexibly used in people's daily life. It has already been an indispensable part of the language, but also it is of close relation with the culture. Therefore, more and more scholars in this academic area get interested in studying euphemism. As Hugh Rawson puts it, “They (euphemisms) are embedded so deeply in our language that few of us, even those who pride themselves on being plain-spoken, ever get through a day without using them.” (Hugh Rawson, 1981:3)

Euphemism has a quite long history in western countries. The word “euphemism” is from the Greek “eu” (good) and “pheme” (saying), and it means “to speak with good words or in a pleasant manner”. In other words, it means that people like to use indirect, obscure and roundabout words to express taboos or unpleasant things. Thus it can be seen that English euphemism has the functions of avoiding taboo, being polite, disguising, being humorous, and being modest. With modernization and civilization of the society, euphemism is extensively used in many aspects of social life like economy, politics, culture, education, and military affairs. Thus, euphemisms in various fields develop continuously. It’s a common phenomenon that someone who doesn’t know the background of English culture is easily puzzled by euphemism. In order to achieve successful social communication, it’s essential for us to know how to use euphemism effectively.

The essay chooses a popular US TV series *The Desperate Housewives* as a case study to analyze the application of euphemism. The play has authentic and standard language, including the way of expression and pronunciation. As the representatives of middle class American, four heroines use a great deal of euphemisms in their daily life. As we all know, female always express their psychological feeling more politely and modestly than male. What’s more, the identity of the middle class makes people cautious on their language. They expect to use suitable words to beautify themselves and deal with conflict. As a result, by analyzing some of euphemisms in this play, the paper aims to study the features of euphemism and give some suggestions about the application of euphemism and improve the ability of cross-cultural communication.

II. The Definition and Origins of English euphemism

Euphemism is a common linguistic phenomenon in human society. As is mentioned, the word “euphemism” is from the Greek and its meaning is “to speak with good words or in a pleasant manner”. So far, euphemism has been defined in different ways by scholars, but there is no exact consistent definition of euphemism. Some representative definitions are as follows:

- a. A polite, tactful or less explicit term used to avoid the direct naming of an unpleasant, painful or frightening reality (Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, 1961).
- b. A euphemism is a polite, pleasant, or neutral word or expression that is used to refer to something which people may find upsetting or embarrassing to talk about. For example, sex, the human body or death.
- c. Substitution of mild or vague or roundabout expression for harsh or direct one. Expression thus substituted.

In a general way, euphemism develops from taboo, which was borrowed from the Tongan language and introduced into English in the 18th century by captain James Cook who came to the island in the South Pacific and discovered a lot of strange social language phenomena. The Polynesians called such phenomenon “taboo”, which means “holy” or “untouchable” at the very start in religion. Later, people use it to denote something that couldn’t be explained, such as death, disease, and some supernatural phenomena. Then euphemism came into being and develops gradually. In conclusion, taboo and euphemism are two similarly related linguistic and cultural phenomena. With

the development of society, euphemism appears in more fields, including economy, politics, culture, education and military affairs. Euphemism is not only some roundabout lexical or phrasal expressions, but also a symbol of the specific culture. It shows the trace of respective cultural development and reflects respective social values as well as cultural values.

In a word, as the symbol of modern evaluation civilization, euphemism plays a crucial role in human communication. The study of euphemism from pragmatic perspective is beneficial for us to achieve successful social communication.

III. A Case Study of English Euphemisms in *the Desperate Housewives*

Pragmatics is the study in context. Euphemism has various functions in specific environment. It can make the unpleasant words sound more acceptable, rude expression sound more polite, embarrassing speech sound vaguer. In this part, the paper primarily analyzes four functions of euphemism in specific use of *the Desperate Housewives* from pragmatic point of view, including taboo, politeness, tactical and humor functions.

Polite function of euphemism is to avoid unpleasant things and make people feel better. Joanna Channell points out in her book *Vague Language* “Vagueness is used as one way of adhering to the politeness rules for a particular culture, and of not threatening face.” It means that in daily life, when people want to express some unpleasant things or behaviors, they would like to use some implicit expressions to avoid hurting others’ face. Using euphemisms of polite function can not only make people feel pleasant, but also it can show the speaker’s elegance. Following are some euphemisms of polite function in the case study:

Example 1:

Bree, “Lynette, you are a great mother. But let’s face it, your kids are a challenge”.

Lynette, “Thank you. That’s the nicest way you could have said that. You know, the truth is, and when you’re not making me want pull my hair out they’re really, really sweet. I’m afraid that if I change the bad stuff, I’m going to change the good stuff.”

This example is a conversation between Bree and Lynette. They’re talking about Lynette’s naughty children. Bree uses the word “challenge” to describe them instead of naughty directly, which not only present her thought, but also save the face of Lynette.

Example 2:

Tom, “Honey, it’s got its advantages. Kids who are home schooled do better in their later years.”

Lynette, “They won’t make it to their later years if I have to spend all day with them.”

Example 2 is about couple’s dialog between Tom and Lynette. Obviously, Tom wants his wife to stay at home to educate their children, while Lynette is not willing to do that. Then she points out the disadvantages of home education instead of disagreeing with Tom directly. Maybe this polite way of euphemism is more acceptable to his husband and is more likely to achieve communicative

goal. The same meaning has different ways to express by using various strategies, which can lead to completely different effects. Sometimes people are reluctant to be blamed and refused directly, and tactical function of euphemisms can realize this communicative goal. There are some examples to express refusal in the play:

Example 3:

Bree: "If you think I'm gonna discuss the dissolution of my marriage in a place where the restrooms are labeled 'chicks' and 'dudes', you're out of your mind."

Example 4:

Paul, "Let me give you a hand."

Martha, "That's really not necessary."

Example 5:

Gabrielle, "I do love him! I do! It's just complicated! You know, there's got to be another way to fix it."

These are some typical examples to refuse people without embarrassing them. In our daily life, we always use common phrases to refuse, including, "I'd love to, but I have to...", "Thanks very much, but I don't need it", "I'm not interested...", "There's got to be another way to fix it."

Pragmatics studies how people comprehend and produce a communicative act or speech act in a concrete speech situation which is usually a conversation. The ability to comprehend and produce a communicative act is referred to as pragmatic competence (Kasper, 1997) which includes one's knowledge about the social elements between the speakers involved, the cultural knowledge such as politeness, and the linguistic knowledge explicit and implicit. Next the thesis will analyze how English euphemism is related with Politeness and Cooperative Principle in pragmatics.

Example 6:

Bree, "Lynette, don't. The fact that you just crossed that street means the world to me. And if anyone should apologize here, it's me."

It's a conversation between Lynette and Bree. The dialog happens after they misunderstand and do not talk to each other. "Means the world to me" is an overstatement or exaggeration and it reflects that Bree's feeling towards Lynette. It means Lynette means a lot to Bree. From the example we know that people like to violate the maxim of quality to achieve a deep impression.

Example 7:

Andrew, "Can I live with dad? I mean, let's face it. We drive each other crazy."

Bree, "Is, is that what you would prefer, Danielle? To live with your father?"

Danielle, "I don't really care, as long as I have my own bathroom."

This conversation is between Bree and her two children Andrew and Danielle. Both of Andrew and Danielle express their unwillingness to live with their mother after their parents divorce. However, two kinds of expressions have different communicative effects. Andrew's direct and impolite words make Bree angry, while Danielle replies to Bree in roundabout and polite way so that it saves her mother's face.

From above all, we can conclude that these expressions are mild, roundabout, considerable and polite. In a word, the CP and PP are two main principles that smooth people's words effectively. In some specific situation, people have to violate the CP for showing politeness by obeying the PP.

IV. Conclusion

Based on the case study, we can discover that euphemism is a mild language and its pragmatic functions make language appropriate and effective. It can save the faces of speakers and hearers and make unpleasant things sound more acceptable. We can also see that the same English euphemism may have different types in various situations. It can be used to avoid taboo or unpleasant things as well as to be polite as much as possible.

Mastering the skills of using euphemism can facilitate one's social contact. For us English majors, knowing and using English euphemism properly can not only help to achieve smooth communication in daily life, but also facilitate the comprehension towards English culture and cross-cultural communication.

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