

An Update on Chinese Euphemisms and English Euphemisms from Language Form to Network Form

Haihong Xie^{1, a}

¹College of Foreign Language Studies, Guilin University of Technology, Guilin, 541000, China
^a1853931433@qq.com

Abstract

Euphemism is ubiquitous in both Chinese and English as a way to express something not so welcome to the audience. There is a cornucopia of euphemisms out of different aims from antiquity till now. With the accelerating coming of the digital era, some new forms of euphemism are emerging. So, this paper, first majorly tries to introduce the most common euphemisms about physiological phenomena that both Chinese and westerners meet with, and euphemisms with a purpose of covering truth; then tries to present some latest euphemisms formed on the Internet, through which readers can be in some ways benefited during intercultural interactions.

Keywords

English and Chinese; Euphemism; Language form; Network form.

1. Introduction

Euphemism, according to a website of etymology, originates in the 1650s, from Greek euphemismos "use of a favorable word in place of an inauspicious one, superstitious avoidance of words of ill-omen during religious ceremonies," also of substitutions such as Eumenides for the Furies (1). That is to say, in the beginning, euphemisms are majorly used in the religious field to avoid a blasphemy of God or something unknown or hard-to-explained at that time. Euphemisms come from people's initial lack of knowledge so that they would fear what does not exist would do bad to them. Thus, they borrowed some words better to be heard in place of directly calling the name of what they were afraid of. In English, euphemism was taken as a rhetorical term at first, whose broader sense of "choosing a less distasteful word or phrase than the one meant" is first attested in 1793(1).

As for this word's formation, also in accordance to this website, it is from euphemizein "speak with fair words, use words of good omen," from eu- "good, well" plus phēmē "speech, voice, utterance, a speaking," from phanai "speak" (from Proto-Indo-European root *bha- "to speak, tell, say") (2). Here presents an example, Euxine, an archaic name for the Black Sea, from Latin Pontus Euxinus, from Greek Pontos Euxenios, literally "the hospitable sea," a euphemism for Pontos Axeinos, "the inhospitable sea." This word is formed from eu- "good, well" plus xenos "host; guest; stranger" (from PIE root *ghos-ti- "stranger, guest, host") (2). So, from its extended usage, euphemism is mainly taken as rhetoric to raise the acceptability of what a speaker says to its hearer. We can see from the long history of this world that people started to pay attention to the way good for their daily communication to maintain their interpersonal relationship.

But with the raketizing development of the Internet, there appears more than the traditional language-form euphemism. Especially nowadays, a boom in social media through the Internet spawns a multitude of new forms of euphemism. Since 1981, there have been 3608 essays related to euphemisms listed in CNKI, which was founded in 1998, while the research fruits about network euphemisms are only 59 (3). It can be viewed that the studies on euphemism are not lacking, but there are far fewer studies on the new form of network euphemisms.

So, in this paper, the author tries to in line with the era, dig out more fruits about network euphemisms based on some traditional language form euphemisms with several typical examples.

2. Language-Form Euphemism

According to Mao Yansheng, he divided euphemisms into two major groups: language form and non-language form (4). Language-form euphemisms are traditional ones, generated in ancient times, while non-language ones just came in the last late century along with the birth of the Internet. So, the former kind of euphemisms in any language much overwhelms the latter one.

Here, three kinds of language-form euphemism are going to be introduced one by one, that is respectively about physiological phenomena, swear words, and of camouflage nature.

Physiological phenomena are inevitable for everyone in this world, leading that those phenomena urge the biggest demands of euphemism. With an overall understanding of this kind of euphemisms in Chinese and English, people could better follow up on the most common euphemisms during their daily interactions with others.

Swear words in people's spoken language are also common to be heard, but in order to soften the rudeness of these words, it is of necessity to employ euphemisms. Besides, out of some particular aims, euphemisms with a nature of camouflage likely jump into people's sight.

2.1. Euphemisms of Physiological Phenomena

In this part, six kinds of common physiological phenomena's euphemisms will be illustrated with both Chinese and English examples, namely, death, illness, sex, excreta, body, and aging.

2.1.1. Death

Both for Chinese and English, death is what they believe most unsuspecting since the psychology of trying to avoid something ill-omened is already engrained for them. Especially in the past times when strange illnesses for doctors at that time are hard to cure up, which caused them to generate a mentality of panic, afraid that such things would hit themselves. And for them, no speaking or talking about it is the most direct and acceptable way to apply. Here list several comparatively ubiquitous expressions of death both in English and Chinese culture.

"Gone to God"

Like "has gone", "gone to God" also is very common when explaining other's death (4). However, it is a little different from the former one, because it is related to the western religion. God in western culture is a holy figure but people feel close to it, so this expression can give people a sense of soft easy for people to accept. For instance, "My dog has gone to God." This most probably happened on a not-so-serious occasion, where this dog has died for some time so the speaker could use a comparatively not-so-serious tone.

"去见阎王"

This expression verily with Chinese national characteristics functions merely same as "gone to God" in western culture. "阎王" in Chinese culture is a figure in hell who takes charge of people already died. From this, we can know this expression indicates a person is going to die.

2.1.2. Illness

Illness is one physiological phenomenon same as death that people fear to face up, because, to some extent, illness means no long way to death. So, people as well try their best to avoid talking about it, then a series of euphemisms related to it comes out.

"V.D."

V.D. is an acronym for venereal disease in English (5). If people directly say someone catches the venereal disease, it might hurt this person because venereal disease concerns his privacy, which exactly is what westerners believe one of the most important parts. So, to directly speak

it out is extremely impolite, especially in front of this person. Then, people pick out the first letter of these two words together in place of the original expression, so that the sense of privacy can be saved as much as possible.

“艾兹海默症”

“艾兹海默症” is a Chinese name for Alzheimer's Disease, but Chinese people in order to express this disease more clearly, sometimes they would choose its another name “老年痴呆症”. While with an attempt to protect the patient's self-esteem, speakers, doctors in particular will not use the latter one but the former one.

2.1.3. Sex

Euphemisms about sex are unproportionate between Chinese and English, since both sides' value on sex is different. For Chinese, more conservative than western people, sex is not acceptable in daily talk, while for western people, sex is a common topic to talk about in their daily lives. Thus, Chinese people are more likely to use euphemisms referring to sex, but foreigners more directly say it out, which means euphemisms about sex in western culture outnumber those in Chinese culture (6). Here only list some typical euphemisms.

“To sleep with someone”

This expression is very common in western when talking about sex-making. It blurs the detailing course of a sex act. Also, “make love”, “get it together” and “to approach” can be its substitute.

“那种事”

In Chinese, people are likely to take some pronoun like “that” to refer to sex or some other private for a person. So this euphemism “那种事” is employed in place of making sex. This occasion actually shows the importance of a specific context in which none of the relevant words about sex is involved, but through the context, speakers could catch the point.

2.1.4. Excreta

Most euphemisms of excreta aim to show speakers' politeness on public or serious occasions no matter in China or western countries.

“Go to the fourth”

This euphemism comes from a funny story happening in Cambridge University in the 19th century, when colleges students here did four pieces of routine work: praying, eating breakfast, smoking, and going to the toilet. It is like three to get ready and four to go, therefore, this euphemism began to be used by people (7).

“起夜”

This expression is ubiquitous in Chinese when people go to WC at night. The first character of this phrase indicates a person wakes up from his sleep. But the second character only shows the time when this person wakes up not showing what he's going to do next. But the two together indirectly means he's going to go to the toilet then.

2.1.5. Body

Euphemism about body or body figure is also vital for people, taken as a polite manner to others or to show solemnness on some occasions. In this part, some about people's figures will be given with corresponding euphemisms.

“Love handles”

This a little bit humorous euphemism is used to describe extra fat on a person's waist. In another word, it indicates a fat person. For example, A says to B, “Wow, you have love handles.” Even B has an idea that A means B is fat, but with this euphemism, B can accept A's words. To mean a person's fatness, “pot belly” “waistline expands” etc. can be borrowed to use.

“发福”

In China, when to express one's fatty figure, “发福” or “心宽体胖” could be taken. These expressions do not depreciate the fatness but describe it as a good state to win the listener's relief. For example, you can say to a fat person that “你真有福相”, which just means his or her body figure is a little bit fat.

2.1.6. Aging

People in China and western countries have totally different views on aging. Westerners do not like to be old and even do not admit it. There is a scenario in the sixth season of *Grey's Anatomy* where an 84-year-old man wants Doctor Slone to put him in a penis prosthetics to help him with a normal sexual function. It can be seen that western man does not admit he is old even he's truly old from biology. While elder Chinese take their age as a bid for winning dignity since aging means more life experiences and much senior than younger people in Chinese culture. But influenced by western culture, the Chinese are also changing their attitude towards aging. “Doubtful age”

This is a euphemism for aging in the west. Apart from it, there are such expressions as a senior, golden age, and chronological gifted to implicitly refer to old people (8).

“老X(first name) / X老”

In Chinese culture, the form of “老X” or “X老” is very common. For example, “吃了吗, 老张? ”, “高老, 最近身体还好吗? ”. Such daily phatic communication frequently witnesses this kind of euphemism for seniors. This word “老” appears not only in this form, but constitutes most roles who rank comparatively high in social status, like “老板” “老革命” “老师” and “老外” (6). Actually, expressions along with “老” show your respect to others.

2.2. Euphemisms for Swear Words

Common in people's daily lives, swear words ask a large demand for euphemisms to cover the impoliteness and indignity to others. Here are some typical and common ones. Language comes from humans, so swear words are mostly related to people.

“Lady/ girl dog”

This is a euphemism from bitch, which connotes lechery. So here comes the euphemism of lady dog or girl dog (7).

“绿茶”

This expression starts from a sexual scandal in 2015. Chinese people use it to refer to a bitch. If they want to uncover their indignity to this person, they would add “婊” followed to “绿茶”, which just means “bitch”.

2.3. Euphemisms in Camouflage Nature

Euphemism of physiological phenomena is the major kind of it. Besides this kind, euphemisms with camouflage nature do not also account for a small part. Different aims develop different euphemisms.

2.3.1. For Committing Crimes

Due to euphemism being endowed with a nature of positiveness, someone could take advantage of it for some bad deeds. On this condition, euphemism is taken as a tool to cover the criminal acts. This condition is common in politics.

“Pacification”

This euphemism indicates “Villages were burned and the inhabitants imprisoned” (7). it came from official words from politicians in Vietnam War that America led. If we just see this word “pacification” without knowing anything about its etymology, it's little for us to link it with a

brutal and miserable scene, instead, we probably connect it with a peaceful picture. As a result, this euphemism in fact is used to alter the scene in people's minds, which actually strikes the original aim of the war stager. Apart from "pacification", there are many other such expressions out of the same attempt in this war, such as, "conflict" indicates "war", "defoliation" indicates "destroying crops", "logistical strikes" and "close air support" mean "bombing raids" (7).

"Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere"

This euphemism is a term in the military, derived from Japanese "だいとうあきょうえいけん", "大东亚共荣圈" in Chinese. It was first put forward in World War Two, in which Japan tried to conquer China. Superficially, it seems that the Japanese wanted to help China to create a prosperous future together. But implicitly, it was an ambitious military conquering plan, which was covered by its euphemism. "European Recovery Program", familiar as "The Marshall Plan" is also said by some scholars as a euphemism for America to control the economy of Europe. The different nuance between "European Recovery Program" and "The Marshall Plan" lies that the former presents a positive side, while the latter one is a neutral expression that just reveals its negative connotation of the initial term.

This kind of euphemism is typically out of malignant aims, trying to cheat people, or totally overturning the ingenuous meaning. Though those expressions come out of soothing people, they cannot be still accepted since this usage betrays morality.

2.3.2. In Career

To show respect or dignity to others no matter what kind of jobs they do, euphemisms related to career take into effect. This kind of euphemism is different from the one out of political aim though both of them are of nature of disguise, which, instead, reflects the positive usage of euphemism.

"Cosmetician"

A cosmetician refers to a hairdresser, which also can be called a beautician (9). In English, new words can be created by adding morphemes, because of English being a derivational language. "-ian" in English from the perspective of linguistics is a suffix that belongs to derivational morphemes, meaning a specialist. Besides this suffix endowed with a similar meaning, "-logist" also can be classified into this group of morphemes. This euphemism for a hairdresser aims to show the speaker's respect to him, in other words, to improve this social status. Also, a waiter or waitress in a bar is called a mixologist or barista, and a sanitation worker is named a garbologist.

"失足妇女"

This euphemism was first proposed by Liu Shaowu, the chief of the Public Security Bureau of China in 2010 (10). In a modern society that is progressed all the time, calling a prostitute "失足妇女" demonstrates that people give their dignity to anyone without any kind of biases. Especially this respect can be founded in a Chinese movie titled *The Flowers of War*, which tells a story of how the 13 prostitutes sacrificed themselves in the battle Chinese people against Japanese armies. So, a sense of humanity blooms the outcome of this euphemism.

3. Non-language form Euphemism

Communication divides signs into two groups: language form and non-language form. The language-form euphemisms introduced above are primarily applied in people's verbalization, which means they mostly need to be spoken out by their speech organs. So, they all are classified in language form.

However, a quantum leap of the development of the Internet gradually produces prolific signs in non-language form, now renowned as emoticons. These signs, unlike those of language form used in serious occasions with a long history, were born out of owing to the technology in the

short past several decades. And they are not existing in written form but are living in online chatting.

Mao Yansheng listed network-form emoticons as a kind of euphemism because he believed that they are of the most essential features typifying euphemism: implicit expressing and less face-threatening (4). If you have experienced the function the emoticons make, you can definitely catch that an emoticon sent to the recipient works much better than a direct sentence typed on the chat window to maintain a harmonious relationship with others. When information is conveyed through typing on the Internet, on some occasions as people's immediate emotions cannot be conveyed clearly to the recipient, they would find the limitations on text messaging. Thus, emoticons become a good substitute for it.

Mao in 2007 categorized euphemism in non-language form mainly into two kinds from the way of the constitution: Arabic-numerical euphemism and emoticon euphemism (4). But from his examples in his essay, emoticon euphemisms are just comprised of punctuation, mathematical symbols, and other signs on a computer keyboard. Advancing age never stops the evolution of humans, neither do the emoticons updating.

According to HuYuanzhen in 2017, network emoticons roughly had then gone three generations: constituted by a mix of linguistic and other signs in keyboards (like “:-p”); “little yellow faces” by imitating people's facial emotion (like 😊); made by netizens themselves characterizing stationary graph or mixed with linguistic signs together (like 🤖 or 🧑) and GIF (11).

As far as the author's concern, nowadays there are four major ways to constitute network euphemisms: Arabic numerals, punctuation, sole written words, and facial emotions. They are usually ubiquitous on the Internet to relieve embarrassment or cover underlying rudeness. However, on formal or serious occasions, it is impolite to use this kind of expressions.

3.1. Euphemism from Arabic Numerals

“54188”

Similar in pronunciation in Chinese of “我是你爸爸”(I'm your father), this euphemism in Chinese denotes taking advantage of others deliberately, which is usually used for adolescents in kidding. In order not to directly hurt the listener, “54188” this expression takes the place of the original words.

“520”

China, a nation accustomed to implicitly expressing inner emotion, thus breeds people also unskillful indirectly express their inner ideas. “520” is similar in pronunciation in Chinese of “I love you”. Therefore, when they want to show their love to someone, euphemisms showcase themselves, both letting the opposite know the sender's love as well as some kind of humor to cover up their shyness.

3.2. Euphemism from Punctuation

“.....”

“.....” in Chinese means “do not want to react to something” is often used on an occasion online where “I” thought what the opposition said or did is unacceptable for me (something rude or disguising) and react to the behaviors. To possibly protect the opposite's self-esteem from being hurt, “I” choose this euphemism “.....” instead of judging him or her.

“???”

“???” meaning “puzzled with something”. When “I” do not catch the speaker's meaning due to his or her ill-logic, this euphemism can be taken as a response to the speaker avoiding both sides' embarrassment.

3.3. Euphemism from Sole Written Words

“你(shi)好(ji)帅(hen)啊(chou)”

This euphemism actually itself indicates its original meaning. According to Qian Wei's opinion, this expression comes from a combination of a pair of opposite phrases (12), in which the superficial Chinese characters are not what the speaker wants to say while the contents in brackets are. Through this method, the uneasy-to-accept contents are easier to send out.

“无fuck说”

Created by netizens, this euphemism evolved from a Chinese idiom “无话可说”, meaning one feels terrible to what the other one did or said. Due to the similar sound between “话可” and “fuck”, as well as a shaft of joking, netizens use it online in a high frequency.

3.4. Euphemism from Facial Emotions

“😞”

This little yellow face is selected from the latest WeChat emojis, and means “broken”, usually used when the opposite said something bad and heartbroken, which frustrated you a lot but you still have to be polite. For example, you texted online to your friend about one more homework after already a lot your teacher noticed you, and this emoji is followed up. Thought this little face, the sort of frustration can be covered up so as to avoid your friend feeling embarrassed about your dilemma.

“🤪”

Made by the netizens themselves, this emoji with both graphs and words further presents people with a sense of humor. Otherwise, the receipt believes it is a little bit cute and funny. This emoji, as a euphemism, usually shows itself when the opposite chatter said some stupid or unreasonable words. The original connotation of it means “you a dumb ass”, but with this combination, a kind of fun and humor oozes out naturally. Thus, the receipt does not feel the sender squarely believes him a stupid guy.

4. Conclusion

Euphemism, along with the occurrence of the world's newness, never stops its pace of updating. Without the Internet, people employ euphemisms in form of words, saying them out so as to let others know their courtesy and let the opposite feel good. Nowadays, taking the fast ride of the Internet, ways to create new euphemisms emerge endlessly, such as Arabic numerals, punctuation, sole written words, facial emotions, etc.

Such creative euphemisms bring out plenty of advantages. First of all, those euphemisms not only enrich the range of euphemisms but also add much more fun to people's daily lives. Besides, the massive extension of the network euphemisms can reflect the public's inner world, which helps guide social opinions. Moreover, relative creative industries thus benefit from it, producing careers like image designing, even the birth of We-Media.

New forms as the euphemism have shown, functions amid of it do not change at all. Euphemism still plays its role in making words more acceptable and showing politeness in avoiding threatening others' faces. All in all, it helps people more fluent communication.

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