A Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Analysis of Differences in Chinese and Arabic Euphemisms

Jingru Zhang[1, *]

[1]Middle East College of Foreign Languages Department, Beijing Language and Culture University, Beijing 100000, China

[*]Corresponding author's e-mail: 202011680499@stu.blcu.edu.cn

Abstract

Euphemism, as a linguistic phenomenon, is an integral part of a language. Due to various factors, there are differences in euphemisms among different languages. This paper, using cross-cultural pragmatics as a theoretical framework and employing discourse analysis and interview methods, studies the use of euphemisms in everyday Chinese and Arabic. It compares and analyzes the formation and usage of Chinese and Arabic euphemisms, aiming to help readers more accurately understand the euphemisms that appear in cross-cultural communication, avoid communication failures caused by social and cultural differences, and provide a reference for the study of euphemisms.

Keywords

Euphemism; Linguistic Phenomenon; Cross-cultural Pragmatics; Chinese; Arabic.

1. Introduction

1.1. Euphemism

Euphemism is a linguistic phenomenon, a suitable expression that people hope to find in communication and interaction, which not only enables both parties to successfully complete the communication, but also makes both parties feel that the communication is pleasant.

In the West, the study of euphemism has a long history. As early as the 1580s, George Blunt created the term "euphemism" and first defined it. British linguist Leech proposed the Politeness Principle as a principle and six principles for the use of euphemisms in his book Principles of Pragmatics[1]. Mohammed Farghal published Euphemism in Arabic: A Gricean Interpretation in 1995, summarizing the four main euphemism devices used by Arabic speakers: figurative expressions, circumlocutions, remodelings, and antonyms. He also proposed that there is a close interaction between the conversational principles of politeness and cooperation[2]. Subsequently, linguists such as Menken, Rawson, and Leech conducted in-depth studies on euphemisms and published works such as "The American Language", "A Dictionary of Euphemisms And Other Doubletalk", and "Kind Words".

In China, the study of euphemism began in 1976. Chen Wangdao defined euphemism in his book "Introduction to Rhetoric" and studied euphemism from a rhetorical perspective[3]. Subsequently, linguists such as Chen Yuan, Shu Dingfang, and Shao Junhang began to study euphemisms, and related works such as "Sociolinguistics", "Euphemisms in Modern Chinese", and "Euphemism Research" were published successively.

1.2. Cross-Cultural Pragmatics

Cross-cultural pragmatics is an emerging discipline developed on the basis of comparative linguistics, pragmatics, and cross-cultural communication studies, focusing on analyzing pragmatic phenomena and laws in the communication process of people from different cultural backgrounds. Compared with pragmatics, cross-cultural pragmatics pays more attention to the

social and cultural backgrounds, thought behaviors, etc., of different languages in communication. Compared with cross-cultural communication studies, cross-cultural pragmatics introduces pragmatics for analysis when studying cross-cultural communication.

In 1957, Robert Lado's publication of "Linguistics Across Cultures" marked a new stage in the development of linguistics. In 1959, Edward T. Hall's "The Silent Language" marked the establishment of cross-cultural communication studies. Subsequently, theories such as the principle of politeness and pragmatic errors were proposed, and cross-cultural pragmatics developed accordingly.

In the mid-1980s, cross-cultural pragmatics began to be introduced into China. In 1986, He Ziran and Yan Zhuang published "Pragmatic Errors in English Communication by Chinese Students - A Survey of Differences in Chinese and English Usage", which is considered the starting point of cross-cultural pragmatics in China. With the publication of important works such as "Language and Culture" and "English Discourse Analysis and Cross-cultural Communication", cross-cultural pragmatics has gradually matured in China.

1.3. Research Purpose and Significance

Previous researchers have conducted comprehensive studies on the explanation and definition of euphemisms, but there is a lack of exploration in terms of the formation of euphemisms and their relationship with the culture of the place where they are located; and cross-cultural pragmatics, as an emerging discipline, has great development potential. Therefore, analyzing Chinese and Arabic pragmatics with the theoretical framework of cross-cultural pragmatics is one of the areas waiting to be studied. This paper uses discourse analysis and interview methods to analyze euphemisms in daily Chinese and Arabic communication from the perspective of cross-cultural pragmatics, in order to help readers more accurately understand the euphemisms that appear in cross-cultural communication, avoid communication failures caused by social and cultural differences, and provide a reference for the study of euphemisms.

2. Comparative Analysis of Chinese and Arabic Euphemisms from the Perspective of Cross-Cultural Pragmatics

2.1. Classification of Euphemisms in Daily Communication

When studying euphemisms, they are often classified according to the purpose of using euphemisms. The author believes that in this study, euphemisms in daily communication should be divided into three types: evasion, politeness, and elegance. The most common way to classify euphemisms is to divide them into five categories: evasion, politeness, disguise, elegance, and humor[4]. Among them, "disguise" euphemisms are a type of euphemism used by the speaker to cover up facts for the sake of interest. This type of euphemism includes political euphemisms, war euphemisms, and business euphemisms, so it does not belong to the category of daily communication. According to the definition of "humorous" euphemisms, their use is entirely out of humor. Although it follows the definition of euphemism that "makes both parties feel that the communication is pleasant", it does not have the essential effect of euphemism "euphemistic expression". Therefore, the author made adjustments to the classification and removed "disguise" and "humor" from it.

2.2. Explanation and Comparative Analysis

2.2.1. Purpose of Evasion

Evasion is the purpose of most euphemism usage. Touching on related language taboos in specific contexts can easily generate negative emotions and even cause conflicts in the communication process. Using "evasion" euphemisms to replace taboos in language can weaken unpleasant associations.

Evasion often targets death and disease. Taking the most typical example of avoiding death, there are many alternative expressions for "death" in Chinese - the death of ordinary people is called "gone", "returned to heaven"; the death of soldiers is called "sacrificed"; the death of emperors is called "passed away", "abandoned the world"; the death of Buddhists is called "entered nirvana"; the death of Taoists is called "rode the crane to the west"...

And in Arabic, the alternative expressions for "death" are: "ذهب" (gone), "مضى إلى الجنة" (went to heaven), "انتقل " (found relief), "فاضت روحه إلى خالقه" (his soul returned to its creator), " انتقل إلى رحمة ربه" (moved to the mercy of his Lord)...

It can be seen that the euphemisms for avoiding death in Chinese are greatly influenced by Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, and Taoists and Buddhists have specific expressions for death. Due to the influence of Confucian hierarchical concepts, people of different social statuses have different expressions for death. While the euphemisms for avoiding death in Arabic are most profoundly influenced by Islam. In many cultures, "death" is seen as the deceased returning to a better world, and in Arab Islamic culture, only Allah can determine a person's fate and life and death. The world covered by Allah's mercy and the side of Allah is the best world. However, the concept of hierarchy in Arab culture is not as clear and strict as in Chinese Confucian culture, so there is no strict distinction in the euphemisms used for the death of people of different identities.

By comparison, it can be concluded that the euphemisms for avoiding death in both Chinese and Arabic have overall similarities: they regard death as leaving this world and going to another world; death is not the end, but the beginning of a new journey. This gives death a positive direction and meaning, which is exactly the meaning of euphemism.

2.2.2. Purpose of Elegance

Elegant language makes daily communication more enjoyable, while vulgar language can easily make people feel uncomfortable. Therefore, in daily communication, in addition to avoiding death and disease, it is necessary to use euphemisms to modify those expressions that make people feel embarrassed and vulgar. Expressions considered vulgar are generally related to gender relations, human organs, and physiological phenomena.

For example, in ancient China, the imperial examination took a long time. In order to take care of the physiological needs of the candidates, two types of cards were made: "exiting with respect" and "entering with respect", which required candidates to enter and exit the examination room with respect and not to disturb other candidates. Candidates need to hold the "exiting with respect " card when going to the toilet. Over time, "exiting with respect" gradually evolved into the meaning of going to the toilet, and "respect" also derived other meanings: defecation is called "big respect", urination is called "small respect", farting is called "false respect", and the bucket used for convenience is also called "respect bucket"[5]. And the toilet in Chinese is also called "washroom" and "bathroom".

Similarly, in Arabic, the euphemism for urination and defecation is "قضاء الحاجة" (solving the need), and the toilet is called "البيت الأدب" (civilized room), "دورة المياه" (water room).

Also, in terms of human organs and gender relations, Chinese calls breasts "chest", sex "marital life", "cohabitation", and calls genitals "lower body". Arabic euphemisms for these words are also similar, they also call breasts "صدر" (chest), sex "لامس" (contact), "حرث" (farming), and call genitals "قبل" (front).

By comparison, it can be seen that there is a great commonality between Chinese and Arabic in euphemisms with the purpose of "seeking elegance". Euphemisms are created in ways such as generalization, metaphor, and metonymy.

2.2.3. Purpose of Politeness

The use of euphemisms with the purpose of "politeness" is to maintain politeness and respect for the communication object during the communication process. The expressions of this type of euphemism often have two ways: self-humility and respect for others. Self-humility refers to not overly emphasizing one's own advantages and achievements when communicating with others, to avoid making the listener feel inferior or jealous. Respect for others refers to not being stingy in praising the strengths of the other party during communication, avoiding mentioning the other party's defects and shortcomings, and making people feel respected.

In Chinese, one's own ideas are "humble opinions", and the other's ideas are "high opinions"; one's own house is called "humble house", and the other's house is called "noble house". For example, calling a blind person "visually impaired", calling a deaf person "hearing impaired", and so on. As mentioned earlier, the hierarchical system in Arab culture is not as strict, so in Arabic, it is not customary to show respect for others by belittling oneself and elevating others. But for others' defects, euphemisms will also be used as alternative expressions, such as using "محجوب" (a person who is blocked) to describe a blind person, using "الأذن ثقيل" (the ear is heavy) to describe a deaf person, and so on.

3. Conclusion

This paper divides the euphemisms in daily communication into three types: evasion, elegance, and politeness, and conducts instance analysis and comparison of the euphemisms in Chinese and Arabic daily communication. It can be concluded that the use of euphemisms in Chinese and Arabic daily communication and the cultural factors that form them have both similarities and differences. They are all influenced by religion, but Chinese euphemisms are mostly influenced by Buddhism and Taoism, while Arabic is most influenced by Islam. Chinese is most influenced by Confucian thought. Confucian culture has a strict hierarchical concept, so euphemisms are also influenced by hierarchical status, and there are different expressions for the same thing facing different social statuses. However, Arab culture is different. Although they also have a distinction between superior and inferior, they are not as strict as Confucian culture, so this is less reflected in euphemisms. Different cultures, different histories, languages, and communication habits will have differences; but because different nations have the same views and attitudes on many things, there will also be commonalities in language and communication. Therefore, when Chinese and Arabic or more other cultures communicate with each other, they should grasp the commonalities, pay attention to and respect the differences, in order to make cultural exchanges go smoothly.

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