Cooperative Principle in English Euphemism

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Abstract

Originally euphemism was used in place of a religious word or phrase that should not be spoken aloud. It is a cultural as well as a social phenomenon. Euphemism is restricted not only by the rules in linguistics, but also by the communicative environment. While cooperative principle proposed by Paul Grice is the basic principle to ensure a successful communication. This paper mainly dealt with the possible violating the cooperative principle in the use of euphemisms in order to help achieve a successful cross-cultural communication.

Key words: Euphemism; Linguistics; Cooperative principle; Cross-cultural communication

INTRODUCTION

The cooperative principle is a guiding principle in pragmatics that should be abided by the communication. But in order to have a successful communication, some harsh, blunt, or offensive things in life should not be stated directly and truthfully in certain occasions. Under these circumstances, some better-sounding names should be used—Euphemism. Every language has its own euphemism, so does English. It is deeply rooted in social life and has a great influence on social communication. Considering euphemism and cooperative principle, in most cases, the use of euphemism may violate the cooperative principle, then can people still have a successful communication under such situations? Therefore it is quite necessary for us to understand the relationship between cooperative principle and English euphemism.

1. A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO ENGLISH EUPHEMISM

It is widely known that language communication is a vital approach to maintain social relationship, so people often tend to use the indirect or pleasant expressions instead of those considered unpleasant, rude or offensive in communication. Euphemism, an indispensable and natural part of English language and a common linguistic phenomenon, has been extensively used in human beings’ communication.

1.1 The Definition of English Euphemism

The word “euphemism” comes from the Greek word “euphemo”, “eu” means “good/well” while “pheme” means “speech/speaking”. And thus the literal meaning of “euphemism” is “to speak with good words or in a pleasant manner”. (Allen & Burridge, 1991, p. 4) That is to say, euphemism is used as an alternative to unpleasant expression, in order to avoid possible lose of face, either one’s own face or through going offense, that of the audience, or some of the third of party. Nearly in every language, there are some disgusting words, which make people feel embarrassed. Then there is a great need for us to use a tactful way to express emotion, exchange ideas. That is to say, to use a pleasant, mild or indirect words or phrases take the place of tabooed words.

1.2 Features of Euphemism

(I) Indirect and Implicit

Euphemism always gives people hints in a roundabout way. We can infer the deeper meaning and intention from the context. For example, when someone is ill, we always say “He is under the weather”.

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(2) Universality
Universality is something that is accepted by all people. Though euphemism is indirect and it doesn’t come straight to the point, people can easily infer its deeper implication. For example, when we refer to death, we seldom say “die”, but use the expression “pass away”.

(3) Regional Feature
In euphemism, there are some regional differences. For instance, an Australian woman married to an American man. They spent their honeymoon in America. And one day, the couple intended to go to a party together. But the bridegroom couldn’t find a suitable full dress. The bride took out a birthday suit that she gave him as a present few days ago and said: “Why not wear your birthday suit?” However, the whole family all astonished because in American English, “in one’s birthday suit” is the euphemistic expression of “naked”. So this embarrassing situation resulted from the regional differences in euphemism.

1.3 Communicative Functions of Euphemisms
Language is for communication, whereas euphemisms may lead to better communication. Using euphemisms can avoid being presumptuous in language communication. When we have to touch some topics that are unpleasant, we tend to choose more euphemistic expressions to refer to those painful topics so as not to hurt the hearer’s feeling. We can find the theoretical foundation for this motivation in Leech’s Politeness Principle. Euphemisms just minimize the impoliteness and maximize the politeness in communication. The functions of euphemisms are in agreement with those of Politeness Principle too, as they both offer more benefit to the hearer and leave more cost to the speaker, with the purpose that both of the two sides will feel respected and have favorable impression of each other. As politeness is usually regarded as the manifestation of human civilization, euphemism is one of the most effective strategies to display politeness while modulating interpersonal relationship in human communication.

2. THE COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE

2.1 A Brief Introduction to the Cooperative Principle
In social science generally and linguistics specifically, the cooperative principle describes how people interact with one another. (Leech, 1983, p. 25) As phrased by Paul Grice, who introduced it, it states, “Make your contribution such as it is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.” Though phrased as a prescriptive command, the principle is intended as a description of how people normally behave in conversation. Put it more simply, people who obey the cooperative principle in their language use will make sure that what they say in a conversation furthers the purpose of that conversation. Obviously, the requirements of different types of conversations will be different. Then how do people obey the principle to achieve the purpose of communication? Grice divide the principle into four categories.

2.2 Four Categories of Maxims of the Cooperative Principle
(1) The Maxim of Quantity
※ Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purpose of exchange)
※ Do not make your contribution more informative than is required

For example:
A: What time are they going to the airport?
B: About nine o’clock.
In the above exchange, B gives A the required answer, and exact information obeys the maxim of quantity.

(2) The Maxim of Quality
Try to make your contribution one that is true.
※ Do not say what you believe to be false; Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

For example:
A: How are you?
B: I’m not fine.
In the above example, B’s answer is just his or her present physical condition. So he or she provides the correct information.

(3) The Maxim of Relation
※ Be relevant.

For example:
A: Is he a good teacher?
B: Yes, he is.
In the above exchange, B makes his answer relevant to the question.

(4) The Maxim of Manner
※ Be perspicuous. (Avoid obscurity of expression; Avoid ambiguity; Be brief; Be orderly)

For example:
A: Let’s get the kids something.
B: Ok, but I veto ice cream.
This example obeys the maxim of manner. B’s answer is clear enough.

The above examples show us people in most cases will obey the cooperative principle to achieve a successful communication, but sometimes for special purpose, they will violate the principle especially in the use of euphemism.

3. POSSIBLE VIOLATION OF THE COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE IN THE USE OF EUaphemisms
Grice himself pointed out that these maxims of cooperative principle are not always observed. In some special situations of communication, the speaker often violates one or even more of these maxims, in order
to achieve some kind of purpose or effect. The use of euphemisms is especially so. Euphemism, as a deviation from the normal language, when people use it, they often violate at least one of these four maxims.

In communication like the question-answer patterns in press conferences, generally people or participants are required to observe the CP in order to make their conversations move forward smoothly and successfully. But in reality, in order to meet a certain communicative need, especially in press conferences concerning diplomacy, actually people seldom speak by always faithfully observing these four maxims of the CP. Therefore Grice himself also suggests 5 ways participants can deal with these maxims. First, speakers can straightforwardly follow the maxims, that is, they can speak the truth while giving just enough relevant information in a clear, unambiguous, succinct and orderly manner. Many people do just that most of the time. Second, someone may violate a maxim, as you would do if you told a deliberate lie. A third thing that can happen is that a speaker can opt out of a maxim; this seems to be an uncommon occurrence. The fourth possibility is the maxim clash; cases in which you would have to violate one maxim in order to fulfill another. And perhaps this is the most case of violation of the maxims in press conferences. The fifth and most intriguing way to deal with the maxims of conversation is to flout one of them. When a maxim is flouted, a speaker doesn’t observe the maxim, but cannot be accused of violating it either, because the transgression is so flagrant that it is totally obvious that the speaker knows he or she is not observing it and realizes everyone else in the conversation knows it too.

The existence of the maxims of the CP makes the conversational implicature possible especially on the conditions like in press conferences etc. Conversational implicature allows a speaker of any side in press conferences to convey meaning beyond what is literally expressed. Speakers in press conferences can often use euphemisms or euphemistic expressions to produce conversational implicature or more meaning that the hearers can also figure out its real intentions rather than the literal meaning by violating some certain maxims.

### 3.1 Violation of Quality Maxim
The Quality maxim requires that words should not be false or lack insufficient evidence. But euphemisms violate this guideline with exaggeration or understatement. So some scholars call euphemisms “language of deceit” or “gilded words”. Violation of Quality Maxim means by saying things that are not true and making irresponsible and insincere remarks by the speakers. The reason why people violate this maxim is because it can cause humor, or disguise certain intention. In order to express unpleasant things or ideas, etc. in an indirect, roundabout and pleasant way, euphemisms have a tendency to violate Quality Maxim. Thus hearers should infer the conversational implicature from the illocutionary meaning based on the special context. Here is an example in *Speech at the Graveside of Karl Max*:

On the 14th of March, at a quarter to three in the afternoon, the greatest living thinker **ceased to think**. He had been left alone for scarcely two minutes, and when we came back we found him in his armchair, peacefully **gone to sleep**—but forever.

Obviously, the above example is a piece of memorial obituary. From it we can figure out that the great thinker Karl Max had passed away. But the speech maker mentioned that he just **ceased to think** and **gone to sleep**, which is not true on the surface. The reason why the speech maker said so was because he wanted to avoid saying unpleasant things. Therefore, even though the words violate the Maxim of Quality, still the hearer can understand the real meaning of those euphemisms.

Another example can also provide a vivid explanation:

In daily conversation, people tend to use euphemistic sentences that violate this maxim.

A: I am going to have a party tonight. Would you like to come?

B: I’d love to, but I’m sorry I can’t. I’ve had another appointment with my friend.

According to B’s answer, there are two kinds of explanations: what he says is the fact, or B only wants to refuse the proposal. In fact, according to the context, B is not willing to participate in the show, and does not have an appointment with A, either. He just intends to find an excuse for declining this invitation, and at the same time make a feel at ease. Although B lies, which breaks the Quality maxim; he makes both sides of communication comfortable. If B refuses directly: “Sorry. I don’t want to come.” The situation may get much embarrassing.

### 3.2 Violation of Quantity Maxim
The Quantity maxim requests necessary information for communication should be provided, while excessive information shouldn’t be. English euphemisms violate this rule to some extent. Violation of Quantity Maxim is to provide either less or more information than actually needed. For example, “LADIES” is for “ladies’ room”, “GENTS” is for “gentlemen’s room”, “AIDS” for “Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome”. Some euphemisms or euphemistic expressions are created by contributing less information to violate the Quantity Maxim in order to make unpleasant, rude or offensive words sound more pleasant, polite and elegant. Following is an example violating the Quantity Maxim of the cooperative principle.

In 1934, when Allen Walker Read wrote the essay *Obscenity Symbol*, under the influence of the social value at that time, he didn’t use the word “fuck” which was actually the topic of his essay. But he used the following words instead: “the most disreputable of all English words—the colloquial verb and noun, universally known by speakers of English, designating the sex
act…” obviously the use of the sentence instead of one word violate the Maxim of Quantity of the cooperative principle, but we all know the reason, i.e. even now it is quite embarrassed and unpleasant for us to mention the word “fuck” in any book or public places.

3.3 Violation of Relation Maxim
The relation maxim requires information offered should be related to the subject. But due to special reasons, the speaker intentionally adopts some words or expressions which are not related to the theme and talks in a circuitous way. According to the cooperative principle that the Maxim of Relation refers to “Be relevant” and violation of Relation Maxim of course means that the utterance of a speaker is irrelevant to the conversation. Sometimes English euphemisms may use irrelevant utterances on the surface to express something that the speakers want to say and cannot say (Enright, 1983, p. 89) In fact the implied meaning of the utterances is relevant. For example:

(1) A: “I could eat the whole of the cake.”
B: “Oh, thanks.”

(2) A: “Could you tell me the time?”
B: “Well, the postman has come.”

From the surface, neither the first nor the second conversation seems relevant. But in the specific situation, we can say they are reasonable and correct. In the first example, A didn’t want to express how excited he saw the cake sending by B directly maybe because he feels embarrassed, so he uses the sentence that he could eat the whole of the cake. But B knows the situation well, thus he answers politely. While in the second example which is a good example of the first feature of euphemism, B didn’t tell A the exact time directly, the conversation seems irrelevant, while because the two persons are in the same situation, so A must know the exact time when the postman come, therefore he can get the exact time from B’s answer.

Similar situation can be found in the following examples:

“A criminal” is described as “a guest of law”; “a garbage man” is described as “sanitary engineer”, “stealing” is said to be “to need help in learning to respect the property rights of others”, “lying” is said to be “to distort or miss-present the facts, or to be misinformed” and so on. These euphemisms seem to have no relation with the original topics, but the listeners will get the real meaning from the context.

3.4 Violation of Manner Maxim
The maxim of manner requires the speech to be perspicuous. Sometimes people don’t speak clearly and simply, but obscurely and ambiguously or vaguely on purpose, thus leaving the hearer in a situation of trying to understand the meaning behind it. Euphemism, as a re-symbolizing of things, ideas, or events already symbolized with precision in mind, somewhat overlooks precision and leads to semantic obscurity. Such violation of the Maxim of Manner in euphemism can be found in the following example:

Wife: Harry! Harry! Do you hear me? I need your help.
Wife: Harry! Harry! Are you deaf?
Husband: (getting up from a chair) You are not all there, I should say.

In this example, at first, the husband may not hear what the wife was saying, he is polite to his wife. But when his wife criticized him as a deaf, he quickly defended himself with “You are not all there” which means “you are mad”. So here the husband didn’t say his wife was mad clearly but ambiguously for politeness purpose which helps to avoid a quarrel.

Here are some other examples:

If telling someone that his zipper becomes unzipped, Americans like to say “You’ve lost your license” instead of “Your fly is open”. For the people who are poor, they are not “the poor”, but “the needy, the underprivileged or the disadvantaged”. There are other examples such as “in difficulties” instead of “in debt”, and “friend, companion, partner or roommate” instead of “homoerotism”.

CONCLUSION
It is euphemism that makes language more powerful, magical and pleasant. Normally, using the euphemism, we should follow the cooperative principle in communication. But, for some special purpose, we have to violate it. Correctly understand the reason why we violate the maxims in the use of euphemism can help us use the language more effectively.

REFERENCES


