Cross-Cultural Contrastive Study of English and Chinese Euphemisms

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Abstract

The use of euphemisms is a common linguistic phenomenon in all languages. By using euphemisms, people can indirectly and politely express their ideas, without making the listeners feel awkward and unpleasant. As a mirror of culture, the generation and development of euphemisms are closely related to culture. Euphemisms in English and Chinese are also abundant, but they have both differences and similarities in expressions and cultural connotations. The cross-cultural contrastive study of English and Chinese euphemisms can help people correctly understand the deep meaning in English and Chinese languages and overcome the obstacles in cross-cultural communications.

Key words: Euphemisms; Culture; Cross-culture; Contrastive study

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1. EUPHEMISM AND ITS RELATION WITH CULTURE

The word "euphemism" originated from a Latin word. Its prefix "eu" means "good", and "phemism" means "speech", so the word "euphemism" literally means "word of good omen". *Routledge Dictionary of Language and Linguistics* (2000) defines "euphemism" as "A kind of expressing method which aims at making people feel less embarrassed by using some words with vague and ambiguous meaning instead of those which may make people feel unpleasant and not respected".

The generation of euphemism has its social foundation. While communicating with others, people often face the situation where they can not directly express what they want to say, or sometimes a direct expression will cause the listeners awkward and unpleasant. In these cases, people tend to choose an indirect and roundabout way to express their ideas and thoughts, so as to avoid the embarrassment. With this purpose, euphemisms come into being.

Whereas the use of euphemisms is not only a social phenomenon, it is also a cultural one. The generation of euphemism is also closely related to culture. Due to the low social productivity in the early stage of human society, people were lack of scientific and cultural knowledge, thus there existed a superstitious belief that the direct call of the name of God or a ghost will bring them bad fortune. Then the names of God and ghosts became language taboo and people found substitutes of these names. These substitutes then became euphemisms of that time. With the development of the society, euphemisms in all languages also changed. And this on-going change has always being relying on culture. Different nations possess different natural environment, social patterns, ideological systems, modes of production and values. All these can be reflected in the use of language, including the use of euphemisms.

2. CULTURAL SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES REFLECTED BY ENGLISH AND CHINESE EUPHEMISMS

When we compare different cultures, we will find that the

similarities and differences of the developing course of human society are manifested in cultures. Language is not only the mirror of culture, but also a part of culture. So the similarities and differences of cultures are undoubtedly reflected by English and Chinese languages, including euphemisms.

2.1 Cultural Similarities Reflected by Euphemisms

Euphemism as a cultural phenomenon has its specific role to play in culture. Cultural similarities reflected by English and Chinese euphemisms can be concluded by the functions of euphemisms. Basically speaking, the functions of English and Chinese euphemisms are the same, which can be divided as taboo-avoiding function, politeness function, and deception function. These functions show the universal characters of human culture.

2.1.1 Taboo-Avoiding Function

In English and Chinese, there are some words that cannot be directly said out. For example, during the time when Christianity was prevalent in the western countries, the name of God "Jehovah" became the biggest taboo, so many euphemisms were created to replace the name, such as "the Almighty", "the Supreme Being", "Holy one", "the Eternal", "the Creator", "the Maker", "the Savior", "the light of the world", "the Sovereign of the Universe", "Our Father", etc.. In ancient China, the names of emperors are also tabooed. For example, Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of China, changed "正月" (the first month of a lunar year) into "端月" so as to avoid the pronunciation of the character "正" which is the same as the character "政" used in his name.

Another example is the euphemistic expression of "death". People generally believe that the greatest misfortune is nothing than death, so there are taboos and euphemisms about death both in English and Chinese. The word "death" cannot be directly mentioned, and euphemisms about death are various. In English, the word "die" can be replaced by "to pass away", "to expire", "to be no more", "to breathe one's last", "to come to an end", "to join the majority", "to go to one's rest", "to sleep the final sleep", "to be gathered to one's father", "return to dust", "run one's race", "be no longer with us", "to be at peace", "to be at rest", "to be asleep in the arms of God/ Jesus", "pay the debt of nature", etc.. In Chinese, the word "死" can be replaced by "去世、逝世、病故、寿终、圆寂、涅槃、仙逝、牺牲、捐躯、作古、弃世、与世长辞、心脏停止跳动、去见马克思" etc..

2.1.2 Politeness Function

It is a normal human psychology for everybody to be respected and keep dignity before the others. So to avoid hurting others' feelings and pride in a conversation, people often use euphemistic expressions in stead of words that will lead to the unwanted result. For instance, in Chinese, people will call those who are physical handicapped "残疾" in stead of "残废". Similarly, in English, the word

"handicapped" is euphemistically expressed by "disabled" to show people's respect. The "deaf" people are described as "hard of listening", and "blind" people are "the visually challenged". At present, euphemisms about body figure are more often used than ever before. As more and mo re people pay attention to their figure, you need to be careful while talking to those who have much weight. The word "fat" could never be used. But you can use words like "plump, stout, out-size, over-weight" to describe such person. In Chinese, it is also more polite to use words like "丰满、发福" etc..

The politeness function of euphemisms is well demonstrated by the description of these low or humble occupations. To some extent, the occupations people are engaged in can show their social status, so people in the low hierarchy are usually sensitive towards their jobs. A decent and respectful call of their occupation will show respect for such persons. Therefore, "sanitation engineer" is created for "garbage collector", "cleaning operative" is created for "road-sweeper", "domestic help" is created for "maid" and "security officer" is created for "janitor". In modern Chinese, there are also similar euphemisms about occupations. For example, people call "阿姨" in stead of "保姆", and "大师傅" or "大厨" in stead of "厨子". These euphemisms about occupations not only show the raise of civilization level, but also people's awareness of social equity.

2.1.3 Deception Function

With the development of the society, the use of euphemisms is not only limited in avoiding taboos and caring for the listeners' feelings. On many occasions, it is also employed to hide the facts, and to achieve some ulterior goals. Euphemisms of this kind are widely seen in political and economic areas to deceive the public or distort the pacts. For example, words used in war, such as "invasion" and "raid" are disguised as "incursion", "involvement" and "military action"; Failure in a war is disguised as "break off contact with enemy"; The thousands of homeless people in the war are called "transfer of population"; "Attack" is disguised as "active defense", etc.. These cosmetic words conceal the nature and cruelty of war, and provide reasonable excuse for waging wars. For politicians, these euphemistic words are good tools to whitewash themselves and protect themselves from being excused or charged.

Euphemisms in the economic area are also widely seen. For example, "economic crisis" is replaced by "depression" or "recession"; "poor nations" is replaced by "underdeveloped nations", "developing nations", or "emerging nations". These words all cover up the reality to some extent, and the real meaning of these words need careful thinking.

2.2 Cultural Differences Reflected by Euphemisms

Due to the culture difference between English and Chinese, a topic often being talked about in one culture

may be tabooed in another culture, and something unacceptable in one culture may be quite normal in another.

2.2.1 Different Attitudes Towards "Old Age"

The westerners are afraid of old age. In their opinion, old age indicates decay. So in many western countries, inquiring others' age is seen to be an offense, because "age" is a sensitive topic. There are many euphemisms describing old age, such as "senior citizen, advantage in age, the mature, seasoned man, full of ages, be feeling one's ages, past one's prime" etc.. On the contrary, it is a tradition for Chinese people to respect the old. As far as Chinese people are concerned, "old age" stands for wisdom and experience. In Chinese, people often add the word "老" after a person's family name to show his respect, such as "王老" and "张老". Besides, the word "老" can also be added before a person's family name to show intimacy with this person, such as "老李", "老刘". If a person has much experience in an occupation and is respected by others, people will call him or her "老同志" "老干部" or "老师傅" etc.. Other words indicating old age like "高龄、高寿、桑榆、古稀之年" all show respect to these old people.

2.2.2 Attitudes Towards Privacy

The westerners attach much importance to privacy, which includes age, marriage, income, religious belief, political tendency etc., and they do not want the others to know much about these contents. For example, a western lady will take an immediate aversion if she is asked about her age and marriage state. While in China, you can often hear people around talking about age, marriage and even income. Topics like "您今年高寿？", "您哪年出生的？", "结婚了吗？", "有孩子了吗？" are not forbidden either.

Inquiring others' salary or the price of some private belongings is also seen as impolite in the west. If you really want to know the price of an item, you can ask "It is expensive?" in stead of directly asking "How much is it?" But in China, you will have no worry to ask the price.

Religious belief and political tendency are also private in the west. Questions like "What party do you vote for?" and "What's your religion?" cannot be asked. But in China, these questions are also free to ask.

2.2.3 Naming and Appellation

Chinese people attach more importance to family than people in the west, and their respect for the elder generation is also shown in naming and appellation. The name of a young should not be the same as his or her elder generation, even the pronunciation should be different. Young people could not directly call the name of the elderly ones; Instead they call them according to the rank in the family such as "爷爷, 奶奶, 爸爸, 妈妈" etc.. Comparatively, English-speaking people do not have such strong sense of family rank and social stratum. In the western countries, there is no taboo in naming and appellation. People of different rank in the

family hierarchy and social status could call each other's name directly. It is common to hear children call their parents and even grandparents' names. And it is also very common for a younger person to have a same name with the elder generation. The westerners believe this kind of appellation and naming is a way of showing intimacy and will draw close the relationship between people. To some extent, it reflects the westerners' pursuit of equality.

2.2.4 The Use of Numbers

Cultures about numbers exist in both Chinese and English. There are different taboos about number in different cultures. In the western culture, the number 13 is seen as an unlucky number which people tend to avoid in their daily life. For example, it is rare to see 13 people gather around the same table while having dinner or meetings. It is also forbidden to have 13 dishes on the dinner table. House number, storey number and other number marks all avoid using this number. In Chinese, the pronunciation of "4" is similar to the character "死" (die), so people are unwilling to use this number in doorplate, story number, phone number etc.. The pronunciation of number "3" is similar to the character "散", so weddings and birthday parties are not held on this day. Besides, there is a saying in Chinese that good things should be in pairs, so it is also a tradition to hold important things on even number days, so as to wish that good luck could come.

3. EUPHEMISMS AND CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

3.1 The Definition of Cross-Cultural Communication

Chinese scholar JIA Yuxin and GUAN Shijie defined cross-cultural communication as "communication between people from different cultural background" (JIA, 1997) and "communication between people or group from one cultural background and people or group from another cultural background" (GUAN, 1996). Larry offered his definition of "intercultural communication" as "Intercultural communication is communication between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough to alter the communication event" (Larry, 2009). In conclusion, inter-cultural communication, which is a kind of communication behavior, is the communication between people from different cultural background, social psychology, and people speaking different languages.

3.2 The Influence of Culture Differences on Cross-Cultural Communication

While communicating with a person of another language, people always carry out the communication process on the basis of their own language and culture. Obviously culture differences will manifest themselves in the understanding and use of euphemisms throughout cross-cultural

communication. Thus cross-cultural understanding barrier or improper use of euphemisms will lead to pragmatic failures.

3.2.1 Pragmatic Failures Caused by Different Expression Modes

English and Chinese euphemisms are typically different in structure and expression mode. Because of these differences, speakers of one language often have difficulty in grasping the information of another language. For example, Chinese speakers will be confused when they hear those English euphemisms consisted by numbers like "go to the fourth" (go to the toilet) and "a forty-four" (a prostitute). There are also some euphemisms in the form of abbreviation, like B. O. (body odor), V. D. C. (venereal disease), and T. B. (tuberculosis), which will lead to understanding difficulty if the readers are lack of relative background information. Similarly, the profound Chinese culture has given birth to quantities of unique expressions, such as "穿小鞋", "戴绿帽子", "吃软饭", which also make the westerners confused. Besides, the use of two-part allegorical sayings, such as "孔夫子搬家一尽是书（输）", "吃鱼不吐骨头一说话带刺儿", and "猪八戒的脊梁一无能之背（辈）" etc. is also a unique feature of Chinese euphemisms. The use of this special structure can help release the mood in an over straightforward Chinese expression, and help readers guess the meaning inside it. But the English readers are not familiar with this kind of Chinese expressions, so they can only sigh towards the contained meaning inside this kind of euphemisms.

3.2.2 Pragmatic Failures Caused by Different Value Orientations in Euphemisms

The cultural value difference of euphemisms is best illustrated by words in political and social area. Many euphemistic words in political area are used to conceal the real political purpose. For example, in the Vietnam War, the U.S. government called the invasion "U.S. involvement in Vietnam"; The air raid to Libya is called "surgical strikes"; Civilian casualties in the Iraq War are understated as "collateral damage". These euphemisms reflect the subtle attitude of the U.S. government to some extent, and at the same time, they show the handiness and concealment of political words. It is easy to be cheated by these diplomatic words without enough cross-cultural study.

For another example, in the western countries, the word "sexy" is used to describe an attractive and charming person. If a lady is described as "sexy", she will take it as praise and will be very happy. But in traditional Chinese culture, the connotation of "sexy" is somewhat close to "coquettish". If a westerner who does not know much about Chinese culture describes a Chinese lady as "sexy", she must feel uncomfortable and take it as an insult rather than praise. But with China enhancing its communication with the western countries, more and more Chinese people have accepted the western culture and began to praise others as "sexy".

3.2.3 Pragmatic Failures Caused by Different Class Concept

Many words in our daily life such as "big and small", "high and low", "good and bad", "rich and poor" all indicates social rank. Compared with Chinese, English euphemisms about social rank are larger in quantity and more alert in usage. For example, in the western countries, people advocate democracy and pursuit gender equality, so they have much difficulty in understanding males in Chinese feudal society calling their wives "贱内" and "内人". English-speaking people are also alert to the rank below "the first class". So in 1989, when West Germany held the 56th World Foundry Congress, the English instruction classified hotels as follows: A) Deluxe B) First Class C) Standard D) Private rooms. This kind of ranking criteria does not define the hotels below the first class into "the second class" and "the third class", thus avoiding people's psychological gap. At the same time, it upgrades each class invisibly. However this kind of ranking is difficult for Chinese people to understand and use.

In cross-cultural communication, in order to avoid these pragmatic failures, language user of both English and Chinese need to sharpen their cross-cultural awareness. It is also necessary to acquire as many as possible euphemistic expressions in another language. The more characteristics we know about the culture and its euphemisms, the less barriers and pragmatic failures we will encounter. Of course, we should also bear in mind the proper situation where a certain euphemism is used; otherwise the overuse of euphemisms will appear to be pretentious and unnatural.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, euphemism is a common and long-standing linguistic as well as socio-cultural phenomenon in both English speaking countries and China. As a mirror of culture, euphemisms strongly reflected similarities and differences between English and Chinese cultures. These similarities and differences have brought about conveniences and difficulties in the process of cross-cultural communication. Only when people from different cultures are fully aware of the different cultural background, cultural value orientations and cultural conventions, can they remove pragmatic barriers and carry out smooth and harmonious communication successfully.

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