



The Analysis of the Euphemism: From the Semiotic Point of View

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Abstract

The present study analyzes the linguistic sign's nature of euphemism based on the Saussure's semiotic view of language. According to the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign, no matter what linguistic signifier we use, we still associate this with the things it refers to. Although the euphemistic signifier and its taboo counterpart refer to the same signified, their function during the process of communication is quite different. Through the use of the euphemism, people can indirectly express something unpleasant or socially unacceptable and avoid making the interlocutors embarrassed or awkward. Furthermore, based on this nature of arbitrariness, it is possible that people can continuously create new euphemisms and substitute the old which lost its euphemistic expression.

Key words: Semiotic; Sign; Signified and signifier

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THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Semiotics, as an independent science, emerged in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. The Swedish linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, the American pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce and also

the American philosopher Charles William Morris made great contribution to its foundation. Among them, F. de. Saussure is the undisputed founder of modern semiotics and also the founder of modern linguistics. In his collected work *Course in General Linguistics*, he pointed out: "it is therefore possible to conceive of a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life. It would form part of social psychology, and hence of general psychology. We shall call it semiology. It would investigate the nature of signs and the laws governing them.....Linguistics is only one branch of this general science. The laws which semiology will discover will be laws applicable in linguistics" (pp.15-16). Thus we can say that Saussure's theory of language is proposed from a semiotic perspective. His theory is sign-oriented or sign-based. His contribution to semiotics is his project for a general theory of sign systems.

This theory of sign systems is very influential and is widely applied in linguistics, especially in explaining some specific linguistic phenomena. Many researchers contributed a lot in this field. For example, under the framework of this theory, some tried to analyze the ambiguous sentence (Che, 1998), to account for the emergence of metonymy (Hua, 1996) and metaphor (Zhou, 2000), etc. Enlightened by these studies, I attempt to use this theory to discuss one of the common linguistic phenomena in English: euphemism.

SIGN, SIGNIFIED AND SIGNIFIER

The signs Saussure mainly focused on are linguistic ones. According to him, the sign are composed of two parts: the signifier and the signified. The former refers to the sound-pattern which is not the material sound, a purely physical thing, but the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression it makes on our senses; the latter refers to the concept or the thought, which is more general

and abstract. Moreover, Saussure pointed out two basic principles of the linguistic sign: (1). The arbitrary nature of the sign; (2). The linear nature of the signifier. Since my analysis of the euphemism is mainly concerned with the arbitrary nature of the sign: I'd like to elaborate on the first principle only. To keep clear about what Saussure meant by it, we have to remember that his sign has two parts, and that what is arbitrary is making the connection between them. Language can make any connection between them. Based on this fundamental property, the signs are also characteristic of mutability. Over time, language and its signs change. New signifier-signified links may replace old ones or add to their number. For example, "Tide" used to mean "period" or "season", now it means "periodic rise and fall of water level"; "mouse" used to mean only a type of small rodent, till personal computers were invented and bought with them a new meaning of "mouse" that coexists comfortably with the old one. Nothing would prevent the associating of any idea (the signified) whatsoever with just any sequence of sounds (the signifier) because the relation between them is arbitrary. Whether these changes are caused by the signified, the signifier or both, they always result in a shift in the relationship between the signifier and the signified (p.43).

EUPHEMISM AND SEMIOTICS

"Euphemism" is from the Greek 'euphemia', meaning 'use of good words'. A euphemistic word is less direct and vague and is used to substitute the word that is considered to be harsh, blunt, or offensive. Researchers have studied a lot on this linguistic phenomenon. But they always took different perspectives; some saw it from semantic point of view, some from the sociocultural point of view and the others from the sociopsychological point of view. According to Chinese scholar Shu Dingfang (1955, p.22), euphemism can also be analyzed from semiotic perspective, particularly from Saussure's view of linguistic sign system. So in the following I tend to apply this theory to account for the formation and development euphemism.

Euphemism is tie to taboo (a word borrowed from the Austronesian language of Tongan meaning "prohibited behavior"), which is present in every human society, and frequently centers on topics such as religion and death. In primitive societies, the mere mention of supernatural entities and of the dead was feared to bring about and, therefore, alternatives were devised to avoid this situation; euphemism (specifically called conventional euphemism). In modern societies, the motivation for euphemism is not usually such fears, but is more concerned with not harming the sensibilities of any parties involved (specifically called stylistic euphemism).

Whether we use conventional euphemism or stylistic euphemism, it is the same thing that we use the less direct and vague signifier to substitute the previously harsh or offensive signifier, but these two signifiers refer to the same "prohibited" signified. For example, there exist a lot of euphemistic signifiers to substitute the blunt signifier "death" in English like fall asleep in the Lord, go to meet his Maker, go to a better world, pass away, pay the debt of nature... Since "the bond between signifier and the signified is arbitrary", we can use any linguistic signifier to represent unpleasant or socially unacceptable signified and there is no natural connection between them. In fact, whatever the linguistic signifier we use, we always unavoidably associate it with the signified it refers to. But the purpose of using euphemistic linguistic signifier is to make people comfortable and also people are psychologically easy to accept this kind of indirect expression.

The linguistic signs are always in a state of changing. The euphemism is no exception. Hugh Rawson pointed out: the development of euphemism is governed by two laws:

(1). Law of exclusion

A polysemant refers to the word which has several meanings. If one of its meanings is associated with "prohibited" thing or concept, people always avoid using this word and it becomes taboo word. Linguists call this phenomenon "taboo contamination". The cause of "taboo contamination" is that one of the signifieds in the previously linguistic sign is changed and becomes something prohibited, but there is no change about the signifier. According to Saussure's theory of linguistic sign, this linguistic sign is changed, because there was a shift in the relationship between the signifier and the signified. Take an example of English word 'gay', its original meaning is 'happy and lovely', but it gradually to attached to the meaning of 'homosexual' which is regarded as abnormal in the society, so it became taboo word. We no longer use the linguistic signifier 'gay' to represent its original signified.

(2). Law of succession

As for any euphemistic sign, if the arbitrary relation between the signifier and the signified is destroyed, that is, the euphemistic signifier is associated with the "prohibited" signified, then its euphemistic function will disappear. So people began to avoid using this linguistic sign and search for a new substitution. That is why one taboo word may have several euphemistic words to replace it. For example, 'lavatory' in English can be replaced by privy, toilet, water closet, cloakroom, restroom, comfort station and so on.

CONCLUSION

According to the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign, no matter what linguistic signifier we use, we still

associate this with the things it refers to. Although the euphemistic signifier and its taboo counterpart refer to the same signified, their function during the process of communication is quite different. Through the use of the euphemism, people can indirectly express something unpleasant or socially unacceptable and avoid making the interlocutors embarrassed or awkward. Furthermore, based on this nature of arbitrariness, it is possible that people can continuously create new euphemisms and substitute the old which lost its euphemistic expression.

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