

# Analysis of Euphemism in Advanced English I --Based on Its Definition, Usage and Translation

Yifei Zheng

South China University of Technology, Guangzhou 510641, China

**ABSTRACT.** *Euphemism is very common in figure of speeches and there is a wealth of academic thesis on it. But the relevant analysis on the examples of college textbook are quite few. This paper will be oriented on the examples. Additionally, this paper is divided into three aspects: introduction, usage and translation. Introduction is based on the academic thesis and adds my own understanding. As for the usage, I focus on the reasons why we use it as well as methods how we use it. When translating euphemism, we can choose the literal or free translation skills to keep the original meaning, method and emotion.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Euphemism, Usage, Translation*

## 1. Introduction

In our daily life, we often use euphemism as substitution of the straightforward language which may offend others or embarrass ourselves. Actually, through the textbook, I learn and understand more about the exact definition, different reasons as well as usage and special translation skills of euphemism.[1]

## 2. An Introduction to Euphemism

“Euphemism” is composed of Greek prefix “eu-” (good, sounding well) and root “pheme” (speech of saying). Additionally, in dictionary, it means a word or phrase used to avoid saying an unpleasant or offensive word (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019). Different scholars give different definitions to it. Neaman and Silver describe it as “Substituting an inoffensive or pleasant term for a more explicit, offensive one.” (1983).[2] Shao Junhang defines it as “A mild or vague periphrastic expression as a substitute for blunt precision of disagree-able truth”(2007).[3]

Having read the academic thesis and learned from specific examples in class, I have my own understanding of “Euphemism”: a kind of indirect language or speech expression formed by information-organizers (speakers or writers) deliberately using semantics, grammar or other means in a specific context for things that make people feel awe, scared or shame, so as to keep all the related people involved in this discourse from negative psychological reactions.

## 3. Analysis of the Usage of Euphemism

### 3.1 Reasons for Usage of Euphemism

Before analyzing how euphemism is used, we may as well figure out the reasons why we decide to use it first. Having concluded the articles in the textbook, I find that main reasons are avoiding taboos, being polite and satirizing others.

#### 3.1.1 Taboos

As Zhang Gonggui said, “Language taboo is the most fundamental reason for using euphemism.” (1996)

Death is a bad and sad thing for people, so it belongs to the taboo words. When expressing the meaning of death, we always have considerable euphemisms.

“He commented with a crushing sense of despair on men’s *final release* from earthly struggles.”

- Unit 6 *Mark Twain --- Mirror of America* Page 95 Paragraph 22

Additionally, westerners always are awed by the God or Jesus. They are afraid of offending God by saying it out directly, so sometimes they use “you” to pray.

“Get us through this mess, will *You*?”

- Unit 1 *Face to Face with Hurricane Camille* Page 4 Paragraph 17

### 3.1.2 Politeness

Euphemism aids us in respecting others by indirectly expressing the negative things such as shortcomings, defects or failures of the people who are related to the object of communication. Stating those directly may make them embarrassed, have a feeling of being despised, or hurt them by arousing their guilt or inferiority.

When it comes to the defects or shortcomings of the human body, we usually use “plain” to replace “ugly” and say “stout” rather than “fat”.

“She knows she *is not bright*. Like good looks and money, *quickness passed her by*.”

- Unit 7 *Everyday Use for your grandmama* Page 112 Paragraph 13

“She will stand hopelessly in corners, *homely* and ashamed of the burn scars down her arms and legs.”

- Unit 7 *Everyday Use for your grandmama* Page 110 Paragraph 2

Mom doesn’t directly say Maggie is ugly, foolish or stupid, instead, she uses “*homely*” “*is not bright*” and “*quickness passed her by*” to show that she is not beautiful and quick-witted enough. Mom loves her daughter so deeply that she doesn’t want to hurt her. So she uses euphemism here to describe Maggie and save her face.

### 3.1.3 Sarcasm

Euphemism can also show sarcasm. Even though the word is less straightforward, the exact meaning may become more harsh for people.

“You drove there in your fancy Jaguar, and you took *a lady friend*.”

- Unit 3 *Blackmail* Page 36 Paragraph 24

Ogilvie uses “*a lady friend*” to imply the woman had something with the Duke, to satirize the Duke and even to sow discord between the Duke and Duchess. Then, his behaviors make readers understand his intention of sarcasm, such as “grinning at the Duchess” and “the smug face”.

## 3.2 Different Usage of Euphemism

Having known the reasons why we use euphemism, I will share you about its different usage in articles. Lexical semantic devices and grammatical device are two approaches. Lexical semantic devices have four specific methods, and grammatical device has one.

### 3.2.1 Lexical Semantic Devices

Euphemism can be used through metaphor, metonymy, circuitous expression and antonym.

(1) Conceptual metaphor

Lakoff put forward that conceptual metaphor is a cross-cognitive mapping, which uses the experience of the source domain to understand the experience of the target domain. Part of the characteristics of the source domain are mapped to the target domain, and the latter is partially understood because of the former (1993).[4]

“At last this *intermezzo* came to an end, and I found myself in front of the gigantic City Hall.”

- Unit 2 *Hiroshima - the “Liveliest” City in Japan* Page 19 Paragraph 5

“*Intermezzo*” refers to that the driver doesn’t know the way to City Hall or admit his ignorance when he picks the narrator up, so it takes him some time to ask the policeman for the way. The narrator beautifies this unpleasant experience and uses metaphor to represent it in order not to show his blame directly.

(2) Conceptual metonymy

Metonymy is a cognitive process that provides mental access to another conceptual body belonging to the same cognitive domain or idealized cognitive model through a conceptual entity.

“*His pen would prove mightier than his pickaxe.*”

- Unit 6 *Mark Twain - Mirror of America* Page 93 Paragraph 8

This passage is to salute Mark Twain, so, when talking about his failure, the author uses “*pickaxe*” to describe his predicament in an euphemistic way that he “was flirting with the colossal wealth” and then “rebuffed”. To pursue the coherence, the author uses “*pen*” to depict Twain’s talent of writing at the same time.

(3) Circuitous expression

This is an indirect expression which only states the relevant behavior or understates the serious situation to make people not feel embarrassed or harsh after listening.

“Mrs. Clemens *succumbed to* a heart attack in Florence.”

- Unit 6 *Mark Twain - Mirror of America* Page 95 Paragraph 20

The author used the behavior “*succumbed to*” to refer to the fact that Mrs. Clemens’ was died. He avoids to write the taboo “death” directly.

(4) Antonym

Sometimes, using antonym can also be regarded as an euphemistic method.

“She washed us in a river of *make-believe*.”

- Unit 7 *Everyday Use for your grandmama* Page 112 Paragraph 11

“*Make-believe*” refers to the fake and false thing. This word becomes more euphemistic than “fake”, however, it can efficiently show mom’s discontent for pushing them to learn the things irrelevant and useless.

### 3.2.2 Grammatical Devices (Ellipsis)

Using the method of ellipsis can soften the expression, become more euphemistic and not show too much offence.

“Don’t ask me why: in 1927 *colored* asked fewer questions than they do now.”

- Unit 7 *Everyday Use for your grandmama* Page 112 Paragraph 13

I search on the internet for the word - colored people/race, which is defined by western racists as all races except white people. In this article, the author deletes “people/race” and uses “*colored*” to represent those people. Her change on this word reduces the racial discrimination and shows more respect to them.

## 4. Analysis of Translation

As a specific aspect of translation, euphemism translation must follow the principle and meet the standard of general translation. (Xu Lina, 2003)[5] Larson said, “First of all, the translator needs to identify whether the original text is a euphemism, and then, in the target language, he needs to choose an appropriate form of expression that can be accepted by the target language readers.” (1998)[6]

More precisely, we are supposed to take following points into consideration. First, it is crucial to distinguish euphemism and understand its exact meaning, method and emotion. Second, try to keep the original referring, emotion, figures of speech and style of euphemism. Generally speaking, euphemism translation adopts two methods: literal translation and free translation.

### 4.1 Literal Translation

When there are the same or similar euphemisms in the target language and the source language, the original text can be translated directly into the target language.

“Each day of suffering that helps to free me from *earthly cares*...”

-Unit 2 Hiroshima - the “Liveliest” City in Japan Page 22 Paragraph 38

“Dictating his autobiography late in life, he commented with a crushing sense of despair on men’s final release from *earthly struggles*.”

- Unit 6 *Mark Twain - Mirror of America* Page 95 Paragraph 22

These two sentences are similar for they both use “*earthly cares/struggles*” to depict their lives. Due to that the old fisherman had suffered a lot from the atonic bombardment, he didn’t want to recall it again or say it directly to make himself more heartbroken and desperate. Meanwhile, Mark Twain was so desperate in his old age that he didn’t want to directly say what the numerous sufferings are.

In Chinese, we also use “troubles/sufferings of the world” to refer to the various and tremendous struggles or cares we are suffering. Especially, when we find the troubles are too many or too bothering, it is common for us to use euphemism like these. Therefore, we can understand the feeling as well as the meaning. Using literal translation will fit in this situation and help readers understand their various sufferings.

The examples I gave before will apply to this method.

“At last this *intermezzo* came to an end...”

“you took *a lady friend*”

In Chinese, we also use “small episode” to describe the unexpected situation or the unpleasant experiences and “female friend” to refer to the abnormal sexual relations. Translating these two words literally will not affect the original meaning, method and euphemistic function of “*intermezzo*” and “*a lady friend*”. Moreover, this kind of translation can give readers a more authentic expression in Chinese.

#### 4.2 Free Translation

When the euphemism object in the source culture doesn’t exist in the target culture, and literal translation affects the understanding of the target language readers, it will be necessary to consider translating the meaning of the original straightforward language into the target language.[7]

“But *the blues* did occasionally afflict all the adults. “

- Unit 1 *Face to Face with Hurricane Camille* Page7 Paragraph36

When translating “*the blues*”, we will find that in Chinese we don’t have this kind of euphemism. Moreover, if we don’t translate the original meaning of it, this sentence will perplex the readers. In western culture, the rise of the blues music lead to the new meaning of “blue”, and then they use this word to describe the sorrow and sadness rather than say sad directly. This usage helps the writers and readers to feel less heart-broken about the sorrowful things.[8]

The example I gave earlier will be suitable for this method.

“get us through this mess, will *You*?”

I translate “*You*” to “God”. In Chinese, we don’t regard God or Jesus as taboo. That is to say, when talking about it, seldom of us need to avoid them. Additionally, if I don’t make this change, some of the readers may get confused about what “*You*” refers to here and they will not understand it.

#### 5. Conclusion

Euphemism is a useful method of not saying some unpleasant or offensive words in communication and articles. Basically, we use euphemism to avoid taboo, become more polite and sometimes even satirize others. The usage of euphemism are quite different, such as metaphor, metonymy, circuitous expression, anatomy and ellipsis. When we are translating euphemism, we can choose the literal or free translation skills to keep the original meaning, method and emotion.

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