

The Analysis of Political Euphemisms--- Speech by Obama to Announce the End of the War in Iraq

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Abstract: *Euphemisms, as a linguistic phenomenon, can be observed in all aspects of social communication. Political euphemism, as one of the members of this group, has also been commonly used in the field of politics. Politicians often take political euphemisms as a tool to achieve the goal of defusing conflicts and concealing the truth of matters. Based on Leech's Politeness Principle and Grice's Cooperative Principle, this paper analyses the use of political euphemisms in Obama's 2010 speech announcing the end of the war in Iraq. By studying Obama's speech, the current study may reveal the way in which Western politicians apply euphemism that violates the Cooperative Principle and follows the Politeness Principle in their political speeches as well as the real intentions conveyed.*

Keywords: *political euphemism; Cooperative Principle; Politeness Principle*

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Significance

Euphemisms are a common linguistic phenomenon that exists in daily social communication [16]. Euphemisms are an alternative to rude, abusive, or offensive language [11]. Given that its use can change the meaning of a word or phrase to make it sound more pleasant for people involved in communications, the research on euphemisms has been catching researchers' eyes in the field of linguistics. In politics, politicians often resort to euphemisms as a vehicle for hiding truths, obscuring their true motives, and shaping public opinion [17]. Based on the existing studies, although many studies have researched euphemisms from different perspectives such as semantics, pragmatics, and sociolinguistics, there is little research on the linguistic applications of euphemisms in a particular field and no sufficiently in-depth research. Among them, political euphemisms in the speeches of politicians are less well studied. This paper will consequently take Cooperative Principle and Politeness Principle as a theoretical basis for a detailed analysis of political euphemisms. Hopefully, it may contribute to an enhanced understanding of political euphemisms and deepen awareness of them through the analyzed examples. Moreover, the application of political euphemisms has a direct impact on people's opinions of politicians or governments. The systematic analysis of political euphemisms is also beneficial in discerning the true intentions of politicians.

1.2 Research Question and Significance

Based on Grice's Cooperative Principle [7] and Leech's Politeness Principle [5], this article discusses how Western politicians achieve the goal of defusing conflicts and concealing the truth by using euphemisms that violate the two principles, exploring the role of political euphemisms in the speeches and oratory of politicians and their hidden intentions. Through the pragmatic analysis of the speech, this discussion will provide some references and ideas for the analysis of political euphemisms in the field of pragmatics research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Euphemism

2.1.1 Definition of Euphemism

Euphemisms are given different definitions in different books, dictionaries, and by different linguists.

There is no universally accepted authoritative definition of euphemism. More definitions of euphemisms are commonly used in research as follows:

(1) The British writer George Blunt (1981) first quoted the word euphemism in English and defined it as a good or favorable interpretation of a bad word.

(2) "Mild, agreeable, or roundabout words used which are used to replace coarse, painful, or offensive ones". (p.11)^[6]

(3) "A mild or inoffensive term which are used in place of one considered to be offensive or unpleasantly direct" (p. 434)^[2]

Although there is no unified definition of euphemism at present, we can find commonalities from different definitions, namely that euphemism is the replacement of horrible or offensive language with mild, polite words. As required by the research direction and discussion content, the definition of euphemism used in this paper is Rawson's 'Mild, agreeable, or roundabout words used in place of course, painful, or offensive ones.'(p11)^[6].

2.1.2 Category of Euphemism

From the perspective of semantics, euphemisms can be divided into two categories: positive euphemism and negative euphemism^[1]. The Positive Euphemism, also known as Stylistic Euphemism, is the semantic elevation, which exaggerates the importance of a word and describes "bad" as "good". By contrast, negative euphemism is semantic derogation, meaning that something terrible or excessive is expressed in mild terms. For example, positive euphemism is often used to glorify some professions. Just like the replacement of garbage man with sanitary engineer, the purpose of this expression is to avoid the direct reference to certain relatively low-status professions so as to achieve a glorified effect. Negative Euphemism is used to talk about sensitive topics such as death, weight, age, or physical defects. For example, we usually use pass away rather than die to avoid talking directly about the sad or unacceptable subject of death. Or in the political or military sphere, the use of abbreviations when talking about weapons is intended to avoid alarm and panic among the population by directly mentioning the full name of the weapon.

2.1.3 Research Actuality

The research on euphemisms originated at an early stage by Western linguists. The word euphemism was first invoked and defined in English by the British writer George Blunt in the 1680s. Since then, the study of euphemisms has begun to attract the attention of the international linguistic community and has become a popular research topic for many scholars. Research on euphemisms by scholars at home and abroad has mainly focused on the fields of semantics, pragmatics, sociolinguistics and psychology. ① In the semantic field, the British linguist Hugh Rawson defines a euphemism as 'the substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive expression for one that may offend people or suggest something unpleasant', and divides euphemisms into two categories: positive and negative euphemisms^[6]. In *The Analysis of English euphemism from semantic perspective and cultural practical value* by Beibei Li has discussed English euphemisms from a semantic perspective^[12]. Based on the "meaning" type in Leech's *Semantics*, she reveals the internal mechanism of the formation and use of English euphemisms--the application of associative meaning, that is, the elimination or cover-up of unpleasant associations in order to obtain pleasant associations^[5]. ② In the pragmatics field, Allan and Burridge point out that euphemisms are used as a shield to avoid offending and that the use of it is associated with saving face^[1]. Suwen Li combined with the cooperative principle, politeness principle, and face theory, reveals the communicative functions of euphemism--avoidance of taboo words and withholding information from a pragmatic perspective in^[13]. The avoidance of taboo words is used for the taboo of death, aging and physiological phenomena. Withholding information function is reflected in the concealment of serious social problems and diplomatic scandals.③ In sociolinguistic field, D.J. Enright explores the usage and features of euphemisms and argues that euphemisms arise in certain social contexts in his work *Fair of Speech: the Use of Euphemism*^[3]. Tongqing Gu shows that the phenomenon of linguistic variation in euphemisms reflects the interaction between language and sociocultural and communicational contexts^[10]. Suwen Li also clarified that euphemisms are a cultural embodiment. He further analyses the use of euphemisms under the influence of different cultural contexts such as moral culture and religion^[13]. ④ In the psychology field, Sun Rujian suggests that euphemism is a relatively active speech phenomenon caused by "unwillingness to say" and governed more by psychological factors^[15]. Chunling San connected with social psychology, investigates the causes of euphemisms and the socio-cultural psychology reflected by them. She also argues that euphemisms are a mirror of social psychology, which reflects the psychology when people want to achieve their goals like embellishment, avoidance and

deception in their daily interactions^[9]. In addition to studying euphemisms in the above areas, domestic linguists have also explored them in the rhetoric field. Allan and Burridge define the euphemism as the implicit word to complement the implication instead of expressing the intention straightforward when speaking. They consider euphemism to be a rhetorical device^[1]. The research on euphemisms in various fields by domestic and international linguists provides a solid basis for further research on euphemisms. For example, Hugh Rawson's classification of euphemisms and the pragmatic functions of euphemisms as proposed by Li and Xu have served as theoretical guidelines for the research conducted in this paper^[14].

Based on the above-mentioned review of existing literature, it is also fair to state that euphemisms have been studied in a variety of fields, however, seldom analyzing in-depth in conjunction with the corpus in a particular field. Most of the research has focused on semantics and pragmatics, whereas political euphemisms are less well-researched. Therefore, this study is significant because the research on political euphemisms contributes to exploring the real intention of politicians and exposing the truth about politics. Besides, a few political euphemisms have been studied and analysed on the bases of the Cooperative Principle and Politeness Principle. Therefore, based on these two principles and combined with practical cases, this paper will discuss the use of political euphemism and the effects it can achieve.

2.2 Definition of Cooperative Principle

The cooperative Principle was introduced by the American linguist Grice in a lecture at Harvard University in 1967. Grice believes that in the process of communication, both parties seem to follow certain principles subconsciously or unconsciously in order to achieve effective communication tasks. Whereupon, Grice put forward the Cooperative Principle in his book *Logic and Conversation*^[4].

Cooperative Principle consists of four principles, among which there are some sub-principles, as follows:

A. The Maxim of Quantity

- 1) *Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purpose of the exchange)*
- 2) *Do not make your contribution more informative than is required*

B. The Maxim of Quality

- 1) *Do not say what you believe to be false*
- 2) *Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence*

C. The Maxim of Relation

Be relevant

D. The Maxim of Manner

- 1) *Avoid obscurity*
- 2) *Avoid ambiguity*
- 3) *Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)*
- 4) *Be orderly (p.37)*

Conversational implicature arises when people consciously violate the Cooperative Principle. As Dai Weidong said, 'Only when a maxim is "flouted", to use Grice's term, does "conversational implicature" occur' (p87)^[8]. The following set of dialogues is used to demonstrate the pragmatic effects of violating the Cooperative Principle:

A: How did the math exam go, Jane?

B: We had a basketball match with the other class and we beat them.

This conversation arises in a context where both A and B are aware that it is entirely possible for B to inform A of his grades. However, B's answer is irrelevant to A's question. Then B violates the cooperative principle and creates the implicature which implies that B does not want to talk about his performance in the examination.

Linguists have focused their research on the implications that arise from the violation of cooperative

principle. The reason for this analysis in the context of the cooperative principle is that when using euphemisms, people often subconsciously violate the cooperative principle in order to avoid using direct and irritating language to achieve the euphemistic effect.

2.3 Definition of Politeness Principle

The politeness principle was first introduced by the British linguist Leech in *Principles of Pragmatics*. Leech believes that the politeness principle can be seen as a necessary complement to the cooperative principle, maintaining friendliness between the two parties in conversation and facilitating their communication. The six politeness principles are as follows:^[5]

A. Tact Maxim

(a) Minimize cost to other [(b) Maximize benefit to other]

B. Generosity Maxim

(a) Minimize benefit to self [(b) Maximize cost to other]

C. Approbation maxim

(a) Minimize dispraise of other [(b) Maximize praise of other]

D. Modesty maxim

(a) Minimize praise of self [(b) Maximize dispraise of self]

E. Agreement maxim

(a) Minimize disagreement between self and other

[(b) Maximize agreement between self and other]

F. Sympathy maxim

(a) Minimize antipathy between self and other

[(b) Maxima sympathy between self and other](p.133)^[5]

The reason why this paper will also be analyzed in the context of the politeness principle is that euphemisms are used in order to avoid the harm caused by inappropriate language to others, which indicates the politeness of the speaker.

3. Cases and Analysis

Based on previous studies, it is worthwhile to conduct an analysis of political euphemisms. To start with, there are currently no papers that analyse the euphemisms explored in this text based on the Cooperative Principle and the Politeness Principle. In addition, this corpus contains many political euphemisms, which are of high research value for the purposes of exposing the truth about politics and exploring the true intentions of politicians. Based on Obama's 2011 speech to announce the end of the war in Iraq, this paper will analyse how the political euphemisms used by Obama in this speech violate the cooperative principle and follow the politeness principle.

3.1 The Violation of the Cooperative Principle

Grice's cooperative principle requires both parties to make an effort to provide truthful, adequate, and relevant information during interactions for effective communication ^[4]. However, the cooperative principle will not always be followed by all. On certain diplomatic occasions, when sensitive topics involving political, economic, and military matters are discussed, speakers often convey veiled messages by violating the cooperative principle.

3.1.1 The Violation of the Maxim of Quantity

It is common in the political genre to use euphemisms that violate the maxim of quantity with the aim of easing popular fears and glorifying the image. The maxim of quantity is violated in two ways. The speaker's contribution is not as informative as required and the speaker's contribution is more informative than is required. Here are two examples to illustrate each case.

“As we speak, al-Qaeda continues to plot against us, and its leadership remains anchored in the border region of Afghanistan and Pakistan.” (Obama, 2010)

Al-Qaeda is the global terrorist network established by Osama bin Laden, which Obama uses here to refer to terrorist organisations. Obama violates the maxim of quantity here as he does not make the contribution as informative as is required. The direct mention of terrorist organisations in a speech may cause panic among the population, whereas the use of euphemisms, violating the maxim of quantity, can indirectly and gently point out that the threat of terrorist organisations still exists as a warning but without causing panic.

“...sometimes in the midst of these storms”. (Obama, 2010)

Obama’s use of storms here is a vague reference to the difficulties experienced by the United States(US) during the war in Iraq. The Bush administration carried out unilateralism and blindly launched the war in Iraq leading to serious damage to the United States’ interests. First, the war in Iraq has not only undermined the soft power of the United States but also damaged its international image. Second, the expansion of fiscal spending during the Iraq War has resulted in a heavy financial burden on the United States government. Third, the rise of terrorist forces is a serious threat to United States national security. Obama’s use of the word storms violates the maxim of quantity by not making the contribution more informative to achieve a vague expression of how difficult it was for the United States during the Iraq War, in the hopes of gaining public sympathy and increasing American identity.

3.1.2 The Violation of the Maxim of Quality

The violation of the maxim of quality, namely saying what one believes to be false or something that one cannot back up with evidence, is to legitimise some unreasonable political action.

“Our troops fought block by block to help Iraq seize the chance for a better future. They shifted tactics to protect the Iraqi people; trained Iraqi Security Forces; and took out terrorist leaders.” (Obama, 2010)

Obama here notes the American military’s contribution to Iraq, keeping its people safe and helping to build a better future for them. Although the US started the war in Iraq on the grounds that Iraq had blatantly flouted the rules of international law, privately produced and possessed weapons of mass destruction and aided terrorists, the purpose of the United States gradually emerged over time. The Iraq War is the transformation of the United States by force against other regimes in the name of counterterrorism. Here, Obama has violated the maxim of quality of the cooperative principle by saying what he believes to be false as a way to legitimise the US war against Iraq and to glorify the actions of the US military.

3.1.3 The Violation of the Maxim of Relation

The violation of the maxim of relation means expressing information that is not relevant to the topic, covering it circuitously and indirectly, as a way of weakening the consequences of certain political actions.

“But, as was the case in Iraq, we cannot do for Afghans what they must ultimately do for themselves.” (Obama, 2010)

In his speech, Obama did not use the word ‘troops’ directly when talking about the fact that US troops would not remain in Iraq, but rather said that Iraq had to do what was needed on its own as a euphemism for the gradual withdrawal of US troops from Iraq. This violates the maxim of relation with a euphemism, the direct use of the word troops may deter the population. The use of euphemisms can obscure war-related terms, such as ‘troop’, to weaken the shock of war to the population.

3.1.4 The Violation of the Maxim of Manner

Violating the Maxim of Manner is the intentional use of an expression with an ambiguous meaning to avoid a taboo or to conceal a real purpose.

“...And we have moved millions of pieces of equipment out of Iraq.” (Obama, 2010)

Obama replaces ‘weapon’ with ‘equipment’ here. This avoids obscurity by violating the maxim of manner, which aims to use euphemisms to distance the population from the war psychologically. This avoids direct references to matters involving the war and the naked threat of it, allowing the audience to appreciate what is meant by association and inference.

3.2 The Obedience of the Politeness Principle

Leech's politeness principle requires that both parties to a conversation treat each other with respect, and courtesy to avoid causing offence^[5]. As politicians need to take into account the feelings of the people, they often follow the politeness principle in their speeches to ease social tensions.

3.2.1 The Obedience of the Tact-Maxim

The maxim of tact requires minimizing the cost to other and maximizing the benefit to others. This principle is often followed by politicians for the purpose of enhancing their image.

“Going forward, a transitional force of U.S. troops will remain in Iraq with a different mission: advising and assisting Iraq's Security Forces; supporting Iraqi troops in targeted counter-terrorism missions; and protecting our civilians.” (Obama, 2010)

Obama's statement follows the tact-maxim in the politeness principle. This is based on the fact that the US military will have some of its transition forces in Iraq to help the Iraqi security forces and people rather than having all of its troops leave Iraq outright. The president's expression fully reflects the United States' concerns, with its assistance to the developing countries as a world power seen as conducive to establishing a good image for the United States as assuming the responsibility of a great power.

3.2.2 The Obedience of the Generosity Maxim

The generosity maxim requires minimizing the benefit to self and maximizing the cost to oneself. Politicians often follow this principle in order to create an image of selflessly serving the public.

“The United States has paid a huge price to put the future of Iraq in the hands of its people. We have sent our young men and women to make enormous sacrifices in Iraq, and spent vast resources abroad at a time of tight budgets at home.” (Obama, 2010)

Obama's statement follows the generosity maxim in the politeness principle. The United States pays a huge price for the future development of Iraq with the sacrifice of countless young soldiers in its aid. At the same time, the United States is doing all it can to help Iraq in a financially difficult situation, which shows the US is maximizing the cost to itself. Obama has demonstrated the United States' dedication to helping the world's developing countries in need regardless of its own interests and has created an image of generosity for the United States.

3.2.3 The Obedience of the Approbation Maxim

The approbation maxim requires minimizing dispraise and maximizing praise of others. By following this principle, politicians are able to raise the public's perception of themselves.

“Iraqis are a proud people. They have rejected sectarian war, and they have no interest in endless destruction.” (Obama, 2010)

Obama praised Iraqis as a proud people who love peace and oppose war. His implication was that the US withdrawal was in line with the expectations of the Iraqi people, who were not interested in an endless war. Obama's delivery followed the approbation maxim of the politeness principle because he praised the Iraqi people to the maximum, which made the audience feel comfortable.

3.2.4 The Obedience of the Modesty Maxim

The modesty maxim requires minimizing praise and maximizing dispraise of oneself.

“Unfortunately, over the last decade, we have not done what is necessary to shore up the foundation of our own prosperity.” (Obama, 2010)

The implication that Obama is expressing is that over the past decade, the US government has not made the effort for its own economic development during the period of the Iraq War. In fact, the Iraq War has had a positive short-term economic impact on the US. Spending on defense has invigorated the weak US weak economy, while the war provides jobs for Americans, and US control of Iraqi oil has eased its pressure on energy^[17]. Obama minimizes the economic state of the US during the Iraq War, following the modesty maxim in the politeness principle as a means of gaining sympathy and mitigating blame.

3.2.5 The Obedience of the Agreement Maxim

The agreement maxim requires minimizing disagreement between self and maximizing agreement between oneself and others to create a sense of identification.

“We have persevered because of a belief we share with the Iraqi people- a belief that out of

the ashes of war, a new beginning could be born in this cradle of civilization.” (Obama, 2010)

Obama’s statement follows the agreement maxim in the politeness principle, as he states that the United States and Iraq share the same beliefs. This establishes the unity and commonality between the United States and Iraq to achieve the goal of bringing them closer together.

“Just as the GI Bill helped those who fought World War II- including my grandfather- become the backbone of our middle class, so today’s servicemen and women must have the chance to apply their gifts to expand the American economy.” (Obama, 2010)

In this quote, Obama uses his own grandfather as an example to encourage veterans to make use of their talents. The implied closeness of relatives adds credibility to his words. This follows the agreement maxim in the politeness principle, as Obama has reinforced his own unanimity with American citizens by using his own relatives as examples.

3.2.6 The Obedience of the Sympathy Maxim

The sympathy maxim requires minimizing antipathy and maximizing sympathy between oneself and others to reduce audience aversion and gain support.

“Terrorism and sectarian warfare threatened to tear Iraq apart. Thousands of Americans gave their lives; tens of thousands have been wounded. Our relations abroad were strained. Our unity at home was tested.” (Obama, 2010)

In this sentence, Obama uses the phrase ‘give their lives’ to refer to the soldiers who died in the war, avoiding the direct use of sensitive words, such as death, and reducing the direct impact and harm to the audience. This follows the sympathy maxim in the politeness principle, as it reduces the use of sensitive words that can make the audience feel uncomfortable and thus reduces emotional resentment on both sides of the conversation.

4. Discussion

Employing the cooperative principle and politeness principle as the theoretical basis, this current study analyses euphemisms applied in the political field, i.e. political speeches. This paper takes Obama’s speech to announce the end of the Iraq war as material to reveal how politicians use political euphemisms to achieve political intentions, which they would like to hide or decrease the level of aggression, etc., by violating the cooperative principle and politeness principle. Therefore, it can be concluded that the purposes of politicians to use political euphemisms in conversations and speeches are as follow:

First, through the application of political euphemisms, it is not only effective in embellishing social reality but also in alleviating international political conflicts. For example, in the analysed speech, Obama refers to the United States and Iraq as a long-term partnership based on shared interests and mutual respect. However, the US military did not treat Iraq as its partner during its presence in the country, much less with the common interests of both sides at the forefront.

Second, using the euphemism can effectively conceal the true intention and hide the truth. For instance, in Obama’s expression, the reason we get for the United States invading Iraq was that Iraq privately produced and possessed weapons of mass destruction. In fact, the essence of the Iraq war is the transformation of the US by force against other regimes in the name of counter-terrorism. From a pragmatic point of view, the euphemism is used to conceal the real purpose of the United States’ troops in Iraq by violating the cooperative principle.

In the end, the application of political euphemisms can effectively circumvent sensitive topics in international communication. In order to defend their country’s image and interests, politicians sometimes have to express their views, some of which may be offensive to the interests of other countries. The flexible use of euphemisms allows politicians to make their point in a roundabout way, which follows the politeness principle in order to avoid offending others and to facilitate communication and cooperation with other countries.

5. Conclusion

In the contemporary world, communication is an essential activity for people. With the development of civilisation, people have become more considerate of each other’s feelings and therefore prefer to use subtle expressions in the process of communication. Euphemism is widely used in various fields,

especially in daily life communication, which plays a pivotal role^[9]. As a kind of euphemism, political euphemism, usually appearing in government documents, news reports, and politicians' speeches, plays an irreplaceable role in international communication and cooperation. However, based on the existing studies, research on political euphemisms is scarce and not in-depth. Besides, the number of studies analyzing euphemisms in political speech genres applying the cooperative principle and politeness principle as theoretical guidance is relatively limited.

Therefore, based on Obama's speech to announce the end of the war in Iraq in 2010 as a specific corpus, this paper discusses how Western politicians use euphemisms that violate the cooperative principle and follow the politeness principle to ease conflicts and conceal the truth and analyzes what effects they want to achieve and their real intentions in the given speeches. It can be concluded from the discussion that political euphemisms can semantically achieve the avoidance of taboo words and withholding of information. The specific roles and what they can accomplish are as follows. First, through the application of political euphemisms it is not only effective in embellishing social reality but also in alleviating international political conflicts. Second, using the euphemism can effectively conceal the true intention and hide the truth. Third, the application of political euphemisms can effectively circumvent sensitive topics in international communication. It is clear that the use of political euphemisms by politicians can often diminish the seriousness of a matter or obscure the truth. To a certain extent, this has alleviated social tensions and comforted the public's psyche, while at the same time depriving them of their right to the truth. Consequently, the study of political euphemisms can effectively help us to explore and better understand the real intentions of politicians and truth.

The conclusions drawn in this paper have limitations for addressing the homogeneous corpus of texts. In the future, it is hoped that there will be more research on political euphemisms based on different linguistic theories to examine other materials of politicians' speeches or news reports, supplementing the current research on political euphemisms.

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