

A Contrastive Study of Chinese and Western Euphemism in the Cross-Cultural Communication

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Abstract: Euphemism, as a linguistic phenomenon, has always been widely concerned by cross-cultural researchers at home and abroad. Euphemism has a long history and can reflect many aspects of a country, such as religion, hierarchy, values and so on. This paper will start with the classification and origin of Chinese and Western euphemisms, then describe different functions and ways of use, reasons of the difference between Chinese and Western euphemisms and the importance of euphemisms. This is conducive to enhancing English learners' understanding of Western ideology, economy, culture and other aspects, avoiding unnecessary misunderstanding, so as to improve cross-cultural communication ability.

1. Introduction

The main reason why euphemisms began to be used is avoidance. There are bad things that people try to avoid mentioning directly, such as words related to old age, illness and death, but when they have to talk about them and specify them in order to communicate smoothly, they have to use more roundabout words instead of the words they intended to express directly. This means that, while we choose to avoid them, we naturally find another alternative. It has a great impact on people's daily communication. It can soften a harsh topic and make an awkward conversation pleasant while observing social communication practices. It is not only a common strategy for people to use language, but also a cultural phenomenon.

The English euphemism "Euphemism" comes from the Greek word "Eu" which means "good, very good" and "phemism" which means "good". "Eu" means "good, very good" and "phemism" means "speech", so the whole word can be understood as "pleasant words".

2. Definition of Euphemism

As early as the early 1880s, the English writer Gorge Blunt already quoted the word "euphemism" for the first time in English and gave the following definition: Euphemism is a good of favorable interpretation of a bad word. The Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary explains euphemism as follows: "use of pleasant, mild or indirect words or phrases in place of more accurate or direct ones".

The definition of euphemism in Shao Junhang's "Definition of Euphemism", Department of Foreign Languages, Shanghai Institute of Finance, defines it this way: as a language or speech phenomenon, euphemism should have its object of expression or description; as an alternative to certain expressions, euphemism should have its reasons or motives for being chosen; as a category of language or speech phenomenon, euphemism should have characteristics and means or ways of expression that distinguish it from other categories [1]. Therefore, euphemism exists widely in people's communication speech, and is an extremely important and clever language strategy, which softens and implicitly expresses the originally direct, presumptuous, forbidden and indecent language in a gentle, euphemistic, indirect, abstract and polite way, avoiding unpleasant and embarrassing communication, thus achieving the ideal communicative effect.

3. Categories of Euphemism

3.1 Avoidance Words

In the process of daily communication, people are reluctant to talk about certain phenomena or objective situations, or they are too afraid to talk about them directly, but when they have to mention them, we will choose to use euphemisms to complete this kind of communication. Take the word “old” for example. In the West, people do not want to admit that they are getting old because they think old age is a reflection of slow reaction, rigid thinking and failure to keep up with the times, so they are very shy about this topic and have created many euphemisms to replace it, such as golden ager, second childhood, sunset year, getting on years and so on. For “death”, every country and every nation has its own way of talking about it, which is common, because “death” is considered to be a disaster, a great misfortune, a phenomenon beyond human control, which we all cannot and do not want to face, but we cannot avoid it completely. It is a phenomenon that we cannot and do not want to face, but cannot completely avoid talking about. In English-speaking countries, euphemisms for “death” are abundant, and people often use to pass away, to depart, to leave us, to pay one's debt to nature, happy release to go to heaven, and so on, instead of the word die. In China, people prefer to call “death” as “return to heaven” because Chinese Buddhism believes that death can lead to the Western paradise. Confucianism in the time of Confucius believed that a person's natural life could end, but his or her spiritual and moral life would remain on earth forever.

3.2 Polite Words

In our daily communication, we always have to take into account the need to avoid direct conflicts or presumptions in the process of communication. The principle of politeness is an important principle of euphemism and one that we must pay attention to in our communication, and it is also an extremely important element in pragmatics. In the last resort, we need to choose to use euphemisms to soften our attitude, ease the conflict, harmonize the atmosphere, and express our ideas more subtle and appropriate to the other party. This not only follows the principle of politeness in communication, but also takes into account the feelings of the other party, which makes the conversation and the emotional relationship between the two parties go further. For example, for the word obese, English countries, usually use the words big, fluffy, heavy-set, etc.. In China, for obesity can be expressed as words such as plump.

3.3 Disguising Words

Euphemism is ambiguous, and its use often has a certain function of concealment. In order to make the expression content more acceptable, people will widely use Euphemism in the political, military, economic, criminal and other social fields and in the face of drug abuse, racial discrimination and other social phenomena to cover up the truth, dilute social contradictions and cover up personal defects. In modern Chinese, euphemisms for losing jobs include “unemployed” and “laid-off”. In western society, companies and enterprises do not “dismiss” workers, but euphemistically say “give the sack lay off, ease out, get the boot, streaming the workforce, get the hook Also, say “the poor” as the underprivileged or the disadvantaged In addition, in order to respect people, there are many euphemistic expressions in crime. For example, prison is called the corrective center. When talking about someone serving a sentence in prison, it will also be euphemistically referred to as in the big house or live at the government's expense to avoid their face. In Chinese, being in prison means having an accident or going in; To describe a crime as a mistake or misguided; Use a gentleman on the beam, dirty hands and feet, and three fingers instead of thieves.

3.4 Elegant Words

In Chinese and Western cultures, many topics are considered difficult or vulgar. When talking about these topics, it will embarrass both parties. Therefore, in order to communicate appropriately and avoid embarrassment, new euphemisms have emerged. For example, when it means “going to

the toilet”, people of all ethnic groups are reluctant to talk about the smell and dirt discharged from their bodies. Therefore, euphemisms in this regard are very abundant in both Chinese and English. English: wash one's hand, fix one's face, go to the public comfort station, go to the restroom, see the stars, see one's aunt, answer nature's call, do one's business, get some fresh air, etc. Chinese includes hand washing, dressing, crouching, going to No.1, relaxing, convenience, No. 1, No. 2, large, small, etc. In English, women's menstruation is often referred to as in one's periods, be a woman for a week, have a visitor, etc., while in Chinese, it is referred to as “coming to aunt”, “menstrual leave”, “coming to work”.

4. The Similarities between English and Chinese euphemisms

4.1 Avoid Taboo Words

Taboo is the main psychological basis of euphemism, which originates from superstition and religion. People use euphemisms to refer to natural forces, spirits and other supernatural for fear of disaster. Disease and death have always been daunting topics. There are many examples of death in both English and Chinese cultures. When someone is sick, Chinese usually says “he is not comfortable”, there are similar expressions in English, “he doesn't feel well”, which are examples of how people use euphemisms to avoid situations where the meaning is offensive.

4.2 Show Courtesy

Politeness is another reason to use euphemisms. According to the politeness principle proposed by Leech, in the process of communication, the speaker uses a more elegant way or uses praise and humility to avoid vulgarity and achieve the ideal communication [2]. For example, every girl wants the perfect body and the perfect face, so for the fat lady, people often say “she puts on weight or plump” instead of “she is fat”, “pensioners” instead of “retired people”, “intellectually challenged people” instead of “visually challenged”, “hard of listening” instead of “the deaf” and “plain homely” instead of “the ugly”. Sometimes in order to avoid vulgarity, when the expression of a person pregnant, the Chinese language has “you xi, meng lan,” and so on. There are also expressions such as “in the family way, another to-be, lady-in-waiting” in English.

4.3 Use Metaphor

It is not difficult to see that metaphor plays the same role in English and Chinese euphemisms, and even we can say that many euphemisms are metaphorical expressions. The most common use is on the topic of death. English expressions include “join the majority, kick the bucket, pay the debt to nature, be asleep in the arms of God, answer the final call, be out of pain, settle one's account, lay down one's life, be in Abraham's bosom”[3]. In Chinese, similar expressions include “eternal rest, return to heaven”. Another strong argument about prisons is that polite expressions like “be to a big house” or “be sent up the river” can be used, where the river is the Hudson River in New York. Moreover, when expressing the love of drinking, people say “He is fond of bottle” rather than express it directly in terms of drunks and alcoholics.

5. The Differences between English and Chinese Euphemisms

5.1 Variability Differences

In fact, euphemisms in English are always changing. For example, when people express that the economy is in a difficult situation, they used to use “crisis”, then “depression” and now “recession”. In addition, English borrows many new words from Latin and French to express certain words more politely. So we can conclude that euphemism is changing because of the introduction of Latin and French into English culture.

5.2 Different Ways of Using Euphemisms

There are differences in the use of English-Chinese euphemisms, not only at the lexical level, but

also at the sentence level. This is due to the differences in geography, ideology, national character, social psychology, cultural background and national cultural traditions of Chinese and English people. To understand these differences, it is important for people to learn English better and promote cross-cultural communication.

5.2.1 Euphemisms about Age

In Western culture, age, wealth, marriage, and other issues are considered to be extremely private, which are rarely mentioned directly. Based on this special value level, western culture usually uses euphemism to indirectly state when talking about age. The word “old” is often given the cold shoulder in western countries, because the word “old” corresponds to the concept of “useless”, which is an expression of desolate emotion. Thus other words in the English language are used to convey the meaning of “old”, such as “seasoned man”, “senior citizens”.

The traditional Chinese culture is just opposite, because the respect for the elderly is the traditional virtues of the Chinese nation, such as “old but vigorous”, “old and wise”, “an old steed in the stable still aspires to glory”, which all show the respect for the elderly, “Old” in traditional Chinese culture is usually in the form of honorifics.

5.2.2 Euphemisms about Occupation

In Western culture, it is stressed that every profession is equal. When introducing self-occupation, people usually adopt beautifying ways to make the psychological balance as far as possible while avoiding unpleasant emotions. For example, garbage man is referred to as “sanitation engineer”; shoe shiner is referred to as “footwear maintenance engineer”; people who repair machines is referred to as “automobile engineer”. It is not difficult to find that the Western people pay great attention to self-value in the expression of professional euphemism, which fully reflects the importance of personal ability in social formation.

However, there are few euphemisms about occupation in Chinese, and Chinese traditional culture highly praises the spirit of professionalism, believing that there is no distinction between high and low work and that any occupation that is paid through labor should be respected. If you over glorify your occupation, it will inevitably be seen as hypocrisy.

5.2.3 Euphemisms about Poverty

In Western culture, “poor” means not only poverty but also a manifestation of low social status, so Western culture usually uses more pleasant and mild euphemisms to describe poverty, such as “out of pocket” or “in reduced circumstances” and so on. Unemployment is euphemized as “getting the walking ticket”, and slum is euphemized as “sub-standard housing”. Western culture euphemized poor people as “people of low income”.

In traditional Chinese culture, “poor” is not taboo, even too rich people will be regarded as capitalists. There is a saying in Chinese that “poor people’s children become rich early”, “tight on hand”, “hard pressed for money” are the words to describe the poor people. The euphemism of “poor” is used by Chinese people to describe the poor. Guided by the traditional Chinese culture, poverty is regarded as a manifestation of a literati's high moral character.

5.2.4 Euphemisms about Titles

In traditional Chinese culture, titles are a symbol of power, and the Chinese attach great importance to name avoidance, which is very much related to the social and cultural background of the time. The Chinese used to use the term “the son of god” which means the true son of heaven to describe the emperor, believing that the emperor conveys the will of the gods. The common noble family should also avoid the same name as their own elders, reflecting the basic principle of the order of the young and the old.

Western culture believes in the equality of all people, so there are not too many constraints in the name designation, and there is often the phenomenon of the younger generation taking the name of the elder. We often translate “grandma” as “grandmother”, which is unacceptable to old women in the West. They think “grandma” makes them look too old, so they would rather be called by their

first names. Such cultural differences are also very common in Chinese and English euphemisms.

5.3 Differences in Sentence Level

The differences in the use of Chinese and English euphemisms are not only in the difference of word meanings, but also in the choice of different tones and emotional colors of sentences.

5.3.1 Differences in the Tone of Sentences

In terms of tone, in English, there are always more questions than invocations, and the British are often used to asking each other to do something in a consultative tone, or even to express their different opinions politely. For example, if a British person asks a guest if he can open a window, it would be a bit blunt to say “you can do that . If you say “you can do that .” is a bit blunt, use a “do you have the time ? “is much more polite. In fact, when you ask someone's name or address in English, you can use it like this: “may I have your name ?” is much more polite than “what's your name ?” is much more polite. In Chinese, when people ask each other to do something, they use more imperative sentences.

5.3.2 Differences in Sentence Emotions

In terms of the emotional color of sentences, Chinese people are more subtle in their feelings and usually say “goodbye, welcome to come back next time” when parting, while Westerners are more direct in expressing their feelings, so when parting with Westerners, saying “I will miss you. “ is much better than saying “good-bye” or “see you soon”. Westerners are more humorous, even if they express blame, they often express it in a humorous way, so if someone is nagging at you and you get bored, say “you are so boring” or “shut up!” It's unbearable to say, “Oh, come on. give me a break !” This is both euphemistic and humorous.

6. Reasons for the Differences between Chinese and Western Euphemisms

Euphemism is a common linguistic phenomenon in interpersonal communication. But different countries and nations have different civilizations and cultures (mainly including religious belief, natural environment, social structure, ethics and other factors), resulting in differences in euphemism.

6.1 Differences in Philosophy

There has been great differences between the Confucian Civilization in East Asia and the Christian Civilization in the West. Li Dazhao, in his article *The Fundamental Difference between Eastern and Western Civilizations*, thinks that the foundation of Eastern Civilization is society, and we lay emphasis on spirit. The biggest difference between Chinese culture and Anglo-American culture lies in the different philosophical ideas in the spirit of ethnological culture. The former embodies the spirit of unity between man and nature, while the latter embodies the spirit of separation between man and nature. The relationship between man and nature has always been a basic issue that has been widely concerned and valued in Chinese and Western philosophy.

Chinese people believe in ancestors. For example, many temples worship ancestors like Confucius and Guan Yu. While the West believes in God and hopes to go to heaven after death. So much so that we believe that man can conquer nature: in Western mythology, fire was given by God while we Chinese drilled out of it ourselves; In the West, facing the flood, people should hide in Noah's Ark. But we have Dayu to control the flood and solve it by himself. In Western mythology, the sun is the absolute authority, but we have Hou Yi who shot at the sun and dared to challenge and overcome nature. The Chinese myths of Yu Gong moving mountains, Jing Wei filling the sea, and Kua Fu chasing the sun are all filled with the spirit of resistance. In our view, God may not bless China, but we Chinese people ourselves bless China.

6.2 Differences in the Religious Perception

In ancient times, because human beings could not correctly understand natural phenomena and

forces, they worshiped and even feared the Supernatural. Worship and fear led to superstition, and everything in the universe was endowed with a magical power called “Fetishism”. Language has also been mythologized, which is called “Word Fetishism”. Out of reverence for ghosts and gods, the names of them must first be avoided. So “the earliest themes of euphemism were undoubtedly religious”[4]. What is more, the Bible says, “You shall not take The Name of The Lord God in vain, for The Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His Name in vain. “ That is the reason why there are so many English euphemism about the God. For example, “The Creator, the Maker, Holy One Gad, Gosh,” are all the same. To create more euphemism about the God, semantic or phonetic means were used, and sometimes spelling was used. For example, “God” was spelled backwards into “Dog”.

Since the Chinese people do not have a unified religious faith, Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, etc. all have their followers, religious taboos have not had a large impact on the language of the whole nation. The Chinese The euphemism for “death” in the Chinese language is mostly derived from Taoism and Buddhism. Taoism is the indigenous religion of China and originates Taoism is the native religion of China and is derived from the Taoist thought of Laozi and Zhuangzi. The euphemism of Taoism is fully embodied in the euphemisms, such as “to conceal oneself, to move one's form, to materialize, to disappear, to feather oneself, to disperse one's breath, to return to the mountain of Taoism”. The Taoist doctrine of the immortals left euphemisms such as “to become immortal, to ascend to heaven, to ascend to immortality, to pass away, and to travel to the west on a crane”. Buddhism Buddhism originated in India and was later introduced to China. Buddhism believes that all living things are based on a certain The six paths (heaven, human, asura, hungry ghost, animal, and hell) are the six paths of reincarnation.

Only by converting to Buddhism can we get rid of the suffering of reincarnation and enter the highest state of Buddhist practice. Only by converting to Buddhism can one escape the suffering of reincarnation and enter the highest realm of Buddhist practice. The euphemism for death, “nirvana”, is directly derived from the Buddhist teaching. The euphemism for death, “nirvana,” is a translation of the Buddhist term for the highest state. The euphemisms from Buddhism include “becoming a Buddha, passing away, reverting to the truth, sitting down, and dying”. etc. Buddha Shakyamuni resides in the Western blissful world. All Buddhist men and women who have done good deeds and accumulated virtue in their lives long to reach the Western blissful world after death and to see the Buddha. Therefore, in Chinese, there are also words like “go to the West”, “return to the West”, “go to heaven”, “return to heaven”, “see Buddha”, etc. “to see the Buddha” and other euphemisms for death. The euphemism for death.

6.3 Differences in the Class Nature

Like English euphemism, the name avoidance in Chinese euphemism has a certain religious nature, but it is the class nature that exerts a strong influence on Chinese language. China has a history of 5000 years of civilization. After entering the feudal society, the taboo of names has a strong feudal class color. The Chinese feudal society lasted for 2000 years, and the name avoidance reached the degree of systematization and institutionalization.

The Book of Rites and Qu Li divides taboo into public taboo and private taboo. Wang Dechun(1992) believes that “Public Taboo” refers to the name of emperor in the current dynasty and Confucius, and was avoided by the whole country, also known as “National Taboo”. While “Private Taboo” refers to the names of ancestors and fathers, which are avoided by the whole family. Among them, “National Taboo” has the most far-reaching influence on the national language of the Han people.

The euphemism about “death” and “disease” has the most hierarchical characteristic in ancient Chinese. The ruling class was not only superior in life, but also different from the common people in death. The Book of Rites and Qu Li (ii) : “Beng” describes the death of the emperor, “Hong” describes the death of the princes, “Zu” describes the death of the official in fuderal times , “Bu Lu “ describes the death of the scholars, and “Si” describes the death of the common people[5].

6.4 The Way of Thinking between Chinese and Western Cultures

The Chinese culture emphasizes modesty and courtesy, and advocates modesty as a virtue. Therefore in language expressions, people often use modest terms to address others, so as to show respect for them. For example, “your surname - my surname”, “guigeng-virtuousness” and so on. In English, they like to express it directly and clearly, such as when they hear someone praise you, you accept it directly and say “thank you”. People with Chinese cultural thinking, people often seem to be “sloppy and general, ambiguous” when expressing. When responding to someone, they do not give an answer directly, but say “try”. The English cultural mindset requires a straightforward answer, saying “yes” or “no” directly.

7. The Research Significance of Euphemism

From the practical significance of euphemism in interpersonal communication, it can be divided into two points: (1) On legal level, reasonable deniability. As the saying goes, “Leave some leeway when you speak, and you can move forward and backward freely.” The use of euphemism can reduce the risk of punishment under the legal situation, such as bribery and coercion and other acts of guilt. (2) In daily life, it promotes coordinating interpersonal relationships in daily life. Speakers use euphemisms to indicate the safest relationship between two people, while at the same time expecting listeners to read between the lines and accept suggestions that conflict with their interpersonal relationship. Its use makes it easier for the listener to adopt the speaker's proposal without damaging the existing interpersonal relationship.

8. Conclusion

From the perspective of culture, language carries rich cultural information. Similarly, euphemism is inevitably a reflection of a specific culture. The differences in the use of Euphemism in English and Chinese also reflect the differences between Chinese and Western cultures in various aspects. Therefore, deepening the study of English and Chinese euphemisms can make us have a deeper understanding of the cultural differences between China and the West, strengthen the mutual understanding of different cultures, and avoid some unnecessary cultural conflicts in cross-cultural communication. So as to achieve more effective and successful communication.

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