ATINER's Conference Paper Proceedings Series
LNG2018-0070
Athens, 25 July 2018

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ATINER's Conference Paper Proceedings Series
LNG2018-0070
Athens, 25 July 2018
ISSN: 2529-167X

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ABSTRACT

Euphemism is a kind of inoffensive expression used to convey things that people may find upsetting or embarrassing to talk about, for example sex, the human body, or death. The existing researches on euphemism focus on its properties concerning constituent, function, sociality and culture, but seldom of them deal with its cognitive mechanism. This paper, based on examples in the daily communication, analyzes the categorical mechanism underlying euphemism and the internal factors inducing euphemism. From these analyses, readers will find out how euphemism emerges and works to gently express a less gentle meaning. The paper is expected to offer a new understanding ofeuphemism like this.

Introduction

People usually misunderstand that word meanings are consistent and static. Researchers from many different fields, however, are beginning to appreciate the complexity behind word choice, and the changeable nature of meaning: "Word meanings, it is suggested, are dynamic and negotiable," (Warren, 1992:128). In the area of figurative language, by definition, allocates referents not found in a word's dictionary description. This type of language comes in a variety of forms, and is used for a variety of reasons. Examples include the metaphor of poetry or prose, which aims to surprise and entertain (Lee, 1966), the language of 'political correctness' (Burridge, 1996) that strives to avoid offence, and circumlocutions, which may be employed to uphold civility and avoid impertinence. In this paper first offer the definition of the concept, then encompasses the researches of using euphemisms, and last analyzed the function of this phenomenon.

The Definition of Euphemisms

Euphemism is usually used for politeness in circumstances where some unpleasant and even embarrassing topics are talked about. It is used not only as a rhetorical device, but also a cultural phenomenon. Euphemism refers to an inoffensive expression uttered in an implicit and roundabout way for being substituted for one that is considered offensive out of various considerations in communication process.

Euphemisms, as the powerful linguistic tools is that "are embedded so deeply in our language that few of us, even those who pride themselves on being plainspoken, ever get through a day without using them," (Rawson, 1981:1). Both social and emotional cases need euphemism, as it allows discussion of 'touchy' or taboo subjects (such as sex, personal appearances or religion) without enraging, outraging, or upsetting other people, and acts as a pressure valve whilst maintaining the appearance of civility.

The Research on Using Euphemism

Euphemism usually can be classified into two types: positive euphemism and negative euphemism. Positive euphemism refers to glorifying euphemism, namely transferring the "low" or "bad" things to be "good" items or expressions, covering occupation, institution or respectful appellation words. Negative euphemism means fuzzy euphemism. It transfers the expressions of terrible or excessive things in a moderate way, such as alternative name of death, honorifics of god, and body disability, and so on. In the academic research and daily life, there are more and more cases often expressing some notions in a unique term, which are called euphemism terms. They might be divided into several groups, unpleasant or unfortunate events, physical shortcomings, certain functions of the body, and certain professions.

Unpleasant or Unfortunate Events

It is very common that even though the Chinese students learned quite a long time English in the classroom, they often make a mistake by ignoring the culture differences. Hugh Rawson (1981:3) point out the close relation between language and euphemism, "Euphemism are embedded so deeply in our language that few of us, even those who pride themselves on being plain-spoken, ever get through a day without using them". Linell Davis (2001) explained "what is culture" in simple words in her *Doing Culture: Cross-Cultural Communication.*

According to Kramsch, one of the most important researches within the field of language, culture and learning, says in her book *Language and Culture* (2000:3)that, "Language expresses cultural reality; Language embodies cultural reality; Language symbolizes cultural reality". "It is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways."Language and culture are closely related to each other.

Physical Shortcomings

In daily communication, we sometimes encounter some people who are physical disordered or physical disability. How to communicate with them and avoid the embarrassments usually puzzles us. At this moment people can use euphemisms to have pleasant conversations with them, and avoid hurting each other's heart and relationship.

Certain Functions of the Body

In the public occasion, it is an impolite way to express their private condition, such as, why they go to the toilet, the ladies' monthly bleeding. Euphemism is a good way to help people express themselves properly in order to leave a good impression to others.

Certain Professions

In our everyday life, sometimes people will use a euphemism way to express some social occupation, or institutions by changing its common names into a different way in order to upgrade or raise the social positions. Even though, the culture differences usually some occupations are regarded as a lower social position, people can use euphemism to express the same notion.

The Function of Euphemism

From possible effrontery and offence, the function of euphemism is to protect the speaker, hearer, reader, or all of the above. This offence may occur in the broaching of a taboo topic, e.g. religion or death, or by mentioning subject matter to which one party involved may be sensitive, such as politics or social issues.

In order to improve the quality of the communication, to progress smoothly and without conflict, accommodations are continually made, which is often subconsciously. According to context, the interpretation varies, i.e. whether the speaker means the term to be euphemistic, and the hearer interprets it in that light (Warren, 1992). With euphemism being so entwined with context, however, classification of a term as 'euphemistic' becomes difficult. For this reason, Allen and Burridge (1991:21) suggest the hypothetical context of being "polite to a casual acquaintance of the opposite sex in a formal situation in a middle class environment" as one in which a euphemism is likely to be used in place of a 'dispreferred' alternative. In defining terms, to maintain a constant standard as euphemistic, people usually use this pragmatic context during the current study.

Sexual Euphemism

One of the major concerns in human life, the subject of sex, is likely to elicit embarrassment, which is a potent source of euphemism for Western people of most ages and groups of people. Despite the claim of "narrowing the focus", the boundaries of sexual euphemism are deceptively wide, encompassing the sexual act itself, associated body parts, and even clothing that is in direct contact with these body parts, i.e. underwear (Nash, 1995). In fact, if the size of the euphemism collection indicates the size of the taboo, as suggested by Rawson (1981), the area of sexual taboo is greater than any other. Allen and Burridge (1991:96) state "the degree of synonymy in the vocabulary for the genitalia and copulation has no parallel elsewhere in the English lexicon - except in the terms for 'whore'. The high turnover rate for sexual euphemisms, resulting in these vast numbers of expressions, could be a direct product of the semantic domain of which they are a part. It seems sex has become a great 'secret'" (Giddens, 1992), necessitating its constant discussion and the subsequent creation of new euphemisms.

Warren's Model of Euphemism

How euphemisms are formed is what Warren (1992) always deals with. In this paper, this model, along with the pragmatic "context" introduced above, will figure prominently in the classification of euphemism.

"Novel contextual meanings" is the basis idea of Warren's model. Usually take new meanings for words in a particular context, which are constantly created in language. This creation is rule-governed and the acceptability of new meanings depends on. In her theory, Warren gives four devices for euphemism formation, and uses it as a "desirable alternative" (Warren, 1992:130). To organize the wide variety of euphemisms that exist, these categories are divided into sub-categories of formation devices, word formation devices, phonemic modification, and loan words. To help clarify this diagram, examples of each type of euphemism and the method of formation are described below.

Conclude

To conclude, it appears that there are a variety of ways in which the results of studies on euphemism could benefit not just those trying to understand language, but also those wrestling with the nature of humanity. To trace human characteristics through history, broader studies of the kind presented here could analyze court documents, medical, church and city records, as well as further literary examples. The formation of euphemism could be traced further back in time using these texts to gain a deeper understanding of the historical roots of English, or of other languages for which sufficient evidence exists. Finally, considering the motivation for euphemism permits the outsider a view of the highly individual thoughts and linguistic choices of another human being, of "notions which are not open to observation",(Warren, 1992:159). This insight shows how people are affected, or even controlled, by the mores and pressures of society and, as demonstrated by Lawrence, how they react when they are broken. As George Orwell (1978:65) wrote: "...if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought." Euphemism shows how people encode their ideals and beliefs within societal boundaries, but the question of from whom we are concealing our true thoughts, and why, remains.

The study of euphemisms could also contribute to the teaching and learning of foreign languages and translation between languages. Thus, the cross-cultural communication could be conducted successfully and effectively. As we said earlier, euphemism is the lubricating oil of this world, without it, the world would not be so harmonious and beautiful. All in all, to have a better understanding of the use of euphemisms in English and Chinese will be beneficial for us to avoid misunderstanding. And we can use them to express ourselves clearly and appropriately in the international communication.

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