

## On Adaptation of Euphemism to Context

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### Abstract

Euphemism, as a special linguistic and cultural phenomenon, has played a very important role in daily communication. Therefore, it has long received extensive attention from Chinese and foreign linguists. Domestic and foreign linguists have also made fruitful achievements in the study of euphemism. They have studied euphemism from the perspectives of semantics, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and social psychology. However, in recent years, most of the pragmatic studies of euphemism are based on the conventional theories such as cooperative principle, indirect speech act theory, politeness principle and face theory. Based on the Adaptation Theory proposed by Jef Verschueren, and combined with the pragmatic functions of euphemism, this paper demonstrates that the use of euphemism is to adapt to the physical world, social world and psychological world in the communicative context.

### Keywords

**Euphemism; Pragmatic Function; Adaptation Theory; Communicative Context.**

### 1. Introduction

Euphemism is a universal linguistic and cultural phenomenon all over the world. The etymology of the word euphemism can be traced back to the Greek word (euphemismos), where “eu” is a prefix indicating “good, beautiful,” and “phemism” means “speaking words, language,” that is to say, the original denotation of the word is “good words, pleasant words.” Many scholars have also defined euphemism from different perspectives, and we will detail on euphemism in the following part. In view of the extensive use of euphemism and its important role in communication, Chinese and foreign linguists have carried out a large number of studies on euphemism, and have made great achievements in the definition, classification, composition and pragmatic function of euphemism. In recent years, most of the pragmatic studies are based on traditional theories such as cooperative principle, indirect speech act theory, politeness principle and face theory. Shu Dingfang [1] expounds the relationship between the three principles (cooperative principle, politeness principle and self-protection principle) in the use of euphemism, and puts forward some related problems which need to be solved urgently. Xu [2] also points out that the use of euphemism violates the four sub-rules of the cooperative principle, but also follows the politeness principle and protects the face principle. Later Liang [3] pointed out that the pragmatic function of euphemism is generated through the violation of the principles of cooperation. Its selection and generation depend on the context, and follow the politeness principle, indirect speech act theory and face theory. Later, a large number of pragmatic scholars have studied the pragmatic functions of euphemism through these theories. However, there are few studies on euphemism based on Verschueren’s Adaptation Theory. This paper aims to demonstrate that the use of euphemism is to adapt to the physical world, social world and psychological world in the communicative context based on Verschueren’s Adaptation Theory and the pragmatic functions of euphemism.

## 2. Euphemism

### 2.1. Definition of Euphemism

Many scholars and dictionaries have defined euphemism from different perspectives. It should be said that each definition has different emphasis and different fields of application. For example, as early as the 1880s, English writers introduced the word euphemism, and made the following definition: "(euphemism) is a good or intentional interpretation of a bad word." This earliest definition of euphemism explains the most fundamental characteristics of euphemism. The definition of euphemism in the "Dictionary of Language and Linguistics" is: "To substitute a pleasant or vague expression for an unpleasant or offensive one. The French version of "Linguistic Dictionary" defines euphemism as: "Euphemism is to express some facts or ideas in a mild way to reduce its vulgarity." Hu Zhuanglin's "linguistics: A Course Book" (third edition) defines it as: "Euphemism refers to the use of a word which is thought to be less offensive or unpleasant than another word. [4]" From these definitions, it can be seen that the use of euphemisms is essentially to reduce the irritation of language, and to use indirect euphemisms to avoid mentioning offensive or vulgar language without affecting communication. However, pragmatists believe that whether an expression is a euphemism depends on the context, that is to say, an expression that is a euphemism in one context is not necessarily a euphemism in another context. For example, from the change of the American black people's name from "negro" to "Black American" and then to the present "African American," it can be seen that euphemisms are changing with the passage of time, and the development of society. Therefore, from a pragmatic point of view, euphemisms can be defined as follows: "In a certain context, to use vague, pleasant or polite expressions in place of unpleasant, impolite or embarrassing expressions."

### 2.2. Classification of Euphemism

Based on different classification standards, there are many classifications of euphemism. Firstly, from the semantic perspective, Hugh Rawson divides euphemism into two categories: positive euphemism and negative euphemism [5]. Positive euphemism (positive euphemism), as the name implies, refers to elevating the semantic meaning of the original word and lifting the original "bad, low" thing to a higher level, which can be used to address professions and people honor respectfully. Negative euphemism (negative euphemism) refers to the degrading of semantics, that is to say, to express the original high things in a more mild, low-end way, such as self-abasing terms, the ferocious animals' nicknames. Later, it is found that some euphemisms did not involve semantic changes, but only slight changes in sound or form, so "neutral euphemism" (neutral euphemism) is added later. According to the topics concerned with euphemism, all euphemisms can be divided into several categories: "sex class," "excretion class," "physiological characteristics class," "politics class," "religion class," and so on. It can also be divided into general euphemism and temporary euphemism according to their frequency of use, and the frequency of general euphemism is significantly higher than that of temporary euphemism. Of course, according to different criteria, there are also many other different classification methods.

## 3. Adaptation Theory

Jef Verschueren [6], a Belgian linguist, puts forward the theory of linguistic adaptation in his original work "A New Interpretation of Pragmatics," explains the nature of language use from the perspective of pragmatics with a new idea, and constructs a framework for the study of language use. Jef Verschueren, a Belgian linguist, puts forward the theory of linguistic adaptation which claims language use is a process of continuous choice of language, whether this choice is conscious or unconscious, whether it is for internal or external reasons. Language

choice can occur at any level of language structure, and in the process of communication, both sides have to make a choice, that is, choice exists in two aspects of discourse generation and understanding. The reason why language users can make appropriate choices is that language has variability, negotiability and adaptability. These three attributes are interrelated, influence each other, and interact with each other. Variability makes language selection possible, and also limits language selection to a certain extent. Negotiability makes the use of language flexible, and adaptability makes people reach the communicative purpose through negotiation and selection. In other words, variability and negotiability are for selective service. People 's choice and use of language depends on context. Adaptation to context is the focus of language adaptability, and context is generated in the verbal communication between the two sides of communication. The context factor we mainly focus on is communicative context, which includes three factors: physical world, psychological world and social world.

#### **4. Pragmatic Function of Euphemism**

In daily communication, euphemism is widely used and has a wide range of pragmatic functions. Generally speaking, euphemism has three pragmatic functions. First, the earliest use of euphemism comes from avoiding "taboo words," therefore performing the pragmatic function of avoiding taboos. Second, euphemisms express politeness by violating the cooperative principle to observe politeness principle and protect the face of both sides in communication. Third, euphemisms are used to cover up the truth to beautify the language users' utterances so as to avoid degrading decency, that is, the function of covering up. Next, the author will discuss the three pragmatic functions of euphemism.

##### **4.1. Function of Taboo Avoidance**

Euphemism is closely related to avoiding the use of taboo words, and its primary pragmatic function is related to avoiding harmful, unpleasant and uncomfortable psychological reactions of other members of society. Therefore, until now, some things or some languages can not be mentioned. For example, in some areas of China, the Dragon King Temple has been changed into the Snake King Temple, which is used to avoid mentioning the sacred object of "Dragon". Instead, snakes are used as euphemism. In the West, especially in ancient times, the names of God and Jesus are also taboo words that cannot be directly mentioned, thus they are generally replaced by euphemism. In addition, number 13 represents danger and disaster in the West. Even in the highly civilized countries, such as USA, it is still regarded as taboo. Therefore, avoiding taboo has become the first pragmatic function of euphemism.

##### **4.2. Function of Expressing Politeness**

As mentioned in the introduction, many pragmaticians believe that the use of euphemism violates the four maxims in the cooperative principle, but it also follows the indirect speech act theory and the politeness principle and protects the face principle. In other words, in specific situations, speakers must violate the maxims under the cooperative principle to achieve the euphemism effect, so as to show politeness to the other side and protect the face of the other side. Euphemism requires us to use elegant and less vulgar language for communication. That is to say, in the process of communication, we should try to save face for each other as much as possible, which also saves face for ourselves. The use of euphemism is also related to indirect speech act theory. For example, someone invites you to watch a movie. You cannot refuse it directly and make others embarrassed. Your answer can be: I will hand in some five papers next week. This indirect speech act not only rejects the invitation of others, but also preserves the face of others and achieves a polite response. If we say "avoiding taboo" is the avoidance of "unpleasant" things, "expressing politeness" is the avoidance of "indecent" things. For example, in English-speaking countries, when people talk about sensitive topics such as "old age",

“unemployment” and “relatively humble occupation”, they will use euphemism to describe them. So “handicapped” will replace “disabled” in English, “sanitary engineer” will replace “garbage collector” and “senior citizens” will replace “old people.” The typical polite expressions for “poor people” include “people who have limited consuming power” and “people who are sensitive to consuming” in China. It can be seen that politeness and face preservation are also important pragmatic functions of euphemism.

### **4.3. Function of Covering Up the Truth**

In addition to the two pragmatic functions mentioned above, euphemism can also be used to cover up the unpleasant facts or truths in the speaker's discourse, so as to achieve successful communication. That is to say, in some cases where it is not appropriate to tell the truth, people will use some other ways to show their own ideas to make their words more acceptable to the listener. In this case, people use euphemism to cover up their true intentions. In fact, it is also based on the politeness principle and face theory. However, the application of politeness principle and face theory and the expression of politeness euphemism are different from the application of politeness principle and face theory. The use of euphemism here is more likely to protect the speaker's own face, while the use of politeness euphemism is more likely to protect the listener's face. Due to its own vagueness and vagueness, disguised euphemism is more and more popular in some low-level occupations, political events and commercial behaviors. For example, the United States called Libya's airstrikes as “a surgical attack.” In order to distort history and cover up its heinous crimes in China, Japan changed “invade China” into “enter the mainland” and “Nanjing massacre” into “occupy Nanjing city” in their history textbooks.

## **5. Adaptation of Euphemism to Communicative Context**

In daily communication, language users will make choices from a variety of language forms or language strategies. According to the Adaptation Theory, the language forms or language strategies chosen by language use should be adapted to the context. Euphemism, as a language strategy, its use should also be adapted to the context. The author will discuss the adaptation of euphemism to the three factors of communicative context: physical world, social world and psychological world.

### **5.1. Adaptation of Euphemism to the Physical World**

The physical world exerts a crucial influence on language users' language choices. Verschuren (2000) points out that the physical world factors include the referential relationship between time and space, the position of language users in the physical world and the material conditions of discourse. Time includes the time of event, speech and reference, which is uncertain, so when looking back on the past or talking about the future, the communicator will use euphemism to express his ideas; Spatial reference includes absolute spatial relations, speaker's space, reference space, and the position of communicators in the physical world. These factors will affect the choice of language forms and language strategies.

### **5.2. Adaptation of Euphemism to the Social World**

According to the definition of language, language is a set of phonetic symbol system for human communication. Therefore, social factors should be taken into account in the process of communication. According to Verschuren (2000), the adaptation of language selection to the social world is reflected in many aspects: social occasions, cultural background, social values, customs, race, social class, educational level, occupation, gender, age and so on.

### **5.3. Adaptation of Euphemism to the Psychological World**

The psychological world is another factor that language users need to adapt to when making language choices. Verschuren points out that when making language choices, many

psychological characteristics of language users will cause them to make language choices. The characteristics of these psychological worlds include personality, emotion, belief, desire, motivation, intention and so on. In verbal communication, the language choices made by the speaker will be affected by these psychological factors. The hearer is no exception in understanding the discourse. On the other hand, the hearer should also understand the hearer's discourse and understand his communicative intention. Therefore, the communication process is a process in which the speaker's and the listener's psychological worlds influence each other and jointly promote the conversation.

## 6. Conclusion

Based on Adaptation Theory and combined with the pragmatic function of euphemism, this paper argues that the use of euphemism is to adapt to the physical world, social world and psychological world in the communicative context, and the following findings are obtained:

(1) Different euphemisms can be used to express the same euphemism effect. Therefore, language users have greater flexibility in the use of euphemisms. (2) Generally speaking, euphemism has three pragmatic functions: avoiding taboo, expressing politeness and covering up the truth. (3) The use of euphemism is a dynamic process for language users to adapt to the communicative context, in which the communicative context includes three factors: the physical world, the social world and the psychological world, and the use of different euphemisms also conforms to these three factors.

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