

# **Euphemism and its Pragmatic Applications in Communication**

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Communication is defined as the interchange of thoughts, opinions, or information through speech, writing, or signs. It regulates how we as human beings function in every area of our lives. Communication skills are an absolute must in any place. The appropriate use of language and effective communication is the basis for success in all the domains of human activities like politics, business, areas of work, family and even personal life. The process of communication entails a huge repertoire of intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. Effective communication is crucial in creating a good rapport with the listeners.

Communication is not just verbal in nature. It is an active process influenced by factors like non-verbal actions, an individual's own interpretation, the complexities and ambiguities of human behaviour. It is also fraught with potential points of breakdown. Human beings are not passive objects; they cannot be expected to react to messages as they are supposed to. They have their own interpretations and reactions. Clapitt states that "We actively construct meanings within a unique vortex that includes the words used, the context of the utterances, and the people involved" (8). Eventually there are many limitations that prevent a person from communicating in the easiest form. Hence, there arises a dire need to overcome these barriers. Adhering to proper communication strategies help in constructing an unambiguous and acceptable message. One such strategy used for a mellifluous communication is euphemism.

Euphemism is not just a common linguistic phenomenon. It has become more of a cultural identity used in the process of human interaction to make communication more pleasant and effective. English, being the dominant language used for international communication, requires its speakers to have a refined perception of the nature and structure of the language. A refined use of the language initiates the ability to communicate more effectively in this complicated globalised scenario. It is in the context of refinement in communication that the essence of English euphemism for English learning and other applications have gained a practical significance.

Euphemism acts exactly like a perfect lubricant and enhances the quality of communication. In the words of Wideman,

Communication is like engine oil: it needs to be applied to the machinery or the machinery will not start or, if it does, it will quickly falter and grind to a halt. And the oil, like communication, needs to be continuously recycled and regularly replaced with new oil as the old becomes no longer usable. But what of the quality of the oil? Too little or too thin and it is not effective; too thick or too much and everything just gets gummed up.

English euphemisms have aroused much interest among the English language users worldwide. Researches on English euphemism are generally undertaken in terms of semantics, rhetoric and pragmatics. The various pragmatic applications of English euphemism and its essence in English language teaching, learning and communication are dealt herewith.

English language teaching and learning has a close connection with its culture. The teaching of English will certainly not be complete without a clear knowledge of the national culture. Euphemism is a part of the culture, so English language teaching, deserves a special attention to the teaching of the English euphemisms in order to improve the understanding of the learners.

The most important of all the functions of euphemism is its social purpose. As Pavlenko states euphemism is used “to protect speakers from undesired emotional arousal” (260). The proper use of euphemism facilitates good interpersonal relationships and opens door for a more pleasant verbal communication. The social function of euphemism can further be classified under several aspects. Euphemisms are primarily used while speaking about cultural taboos in order to be polite in communication. A taboo is something forbidden by religions, laws, morals or society. It is a common social phenomenon of every nation.

On account of the difference between cultures and taboos, euphemisms are varied according to circumstances and situations. In a certain situation, what is acceptable in one culture may be a serious taboo in another. In such situations euphemisms are used to cover the harsh, unpleasant reality. There are many offensive and unmentionable things which euphemisms refer to. In almost all the cultures it is offensive to talk about death, war, intercourse, bodily functions and disability. To speak about such taboo topics certain English euphemisms are universally used to indirectly refer to these potentially offensive words. Euphemisms neutralise the negative connotations associated with these offensive entities.

Some of the most common euphemisms that are used to refer to these taboo topics are as follows:

On Death : *go back to the place you knew and loved, awakened to eternal*

*life, off on a boat, to breathe one's last, to free one's horses.*

These English euphemisms on death not only help us abstain from using the word 'death' but also mask the harshness of the situation. It subtly speaks about the bitterness of the situation without embarrassing both the speaker and the listener.

Euphemisms are used when referring to war and everything that takes place at the war field so as to reduce the bitterness of the incidents. It is rather unpleasant when people read or hear that the troops of their own country have committed actions that have resulted in the death of innocent civilians. Hence, for the sake of better acceptance, euphemisms are used.

On War : *collateral damage, insurgents/ activists/ rebels* (terrorists),

*neutralise/ take out/ take for a ride* (kill).

On Intercourse : *amorous congress, to sleep with, go to bed with, to make love,*

*make feet for children's stockings, the service of Venus, melting moments.*

On Bodily Functions : *answer the call of nature, relieve oneself, use the rest room.*

On Disability : *physically challenged, differently abled, spastic, lunatic,*  
*special children, autistic children, under achiever.*

The misuse of taboo and euphemism is a result of cultural ignorance and misunderstanding. A person's culture determines their style of communication and its refinement. Euphemisms "provide clean words which are used to cover atrocious deeds; [they] conceal crime or deflect guilt" (Slovenko 547). Thus, both taboos and euphemisms are inevitable in communication.

The second function is that euphemisms are used to sustain the customary practices of a culture and for polite exchange of ideas. Euphemisms are used in the place of a word or phrase containing derogatory word or sentence. People carrying out exchanges on old people, lower- class working people, wealth, property, pregnancy etc. find it inconvenient to directly express their meaning. This is because certain words often make people feel uncomfortable. The

English language has given rise to many euphemistic expressions to resolve this kind of embarrassment.

On Old people : *senior citizen, second childhood, the longer living.*

On Lower- class working people : *waste managers/ waste management personnel*

*garbage collectors), sanitation engineers, cleaning*

*engineers, agriculturalists (farmers), custodians*

*(janitors), beautician/ hair dresser (barber).*

On Pregnancy : *to be in a delicate condition , a lady-in-waiting, eating for two, in the family way.*

On Wealth : *bucks (money), be better off (rich).*

These expressions are used to avoid presumptuous remarks and indecent assault in communication. Echoing this view, Mayfield has noted that euphemisms “sanitise and camouflage actions, things, or events that could appear unacceptable in light of professed values” (270).

The third function is the usage of euphemisms for political purposes. It is an undeniable truth that euphemism is a tool for political participants to hide scandals, disguise the truth, and guide public thoughts when discussing social issues or events. The most significant feature of the political euphemism is its greater degree of deviation from the signified. As the Swiss linguist Saussure envisages, language signs are a combination of the signifier (the phonetic forms of language) and the signified (objects in existence represented by linguistic forms).

On Politics : *peace- keeper (intermediate-range missile), active*

*aefense/ operation (attack), negative growth*

*(recession), gadget/ device (atom bombs), rescue mission (invasion).*

Euphemisms are created by transforming the signifier to enlarge the associated distance between the signifier and the signified. Political euphemisms are different from those commonly used euphemistic forms because it deviates greatly from the meaning expressed by its signifier. At times more than deviation, a complete distortion of meaning takes place, “euphemisms can also hide seemingly simple and straightforward words behind deceptive or

overly complex ones” (Iacone 60). These euphemisms are also characterized by replacing direct expressions with implicative, obscure and vague ones thus playing a quintessential role in unravelling the connotation of political discourse.

Linguistic correctness is a serious phenomenon in communication. The communicators ought to be extremely careful not to insult anyone or hurt other people's feelings with their words. To some extent the quality of communication has been taken too far with the help of euphemisms; but there are times when it seems impossible to come up with expressions that do not hurt anyone's feelings. It is equally important that people do not feel discriminated through language. Adhering to linguistic accuracy is the only way through which pleasant exchange of ideas could be facilitated.

On the whole, Euphemisms enable people to talk subtly about embarrassing, painful or inappropriate issues that are considered to be offensive. Failure to perceive and use euphemisms could be a tremendous obstacle in communication. There is a growing importance for euphemisms for two specific reasons. In the first place euphemistic expressions smoothen communication and help the communicators to deliver their message in an acceptable manner. Secondly, euphemism has lent scope for cultural and cross-cultural studies. Usage of euphemisms promotes the cross-cultural awareness and heightens communicative competence. Therefore euphemisms are gaining importance as reflective subjects of research and exploration.

In the passage of time the euphemistic expressions tend to become stale and might receive the same negative connotations that the original term had, in which case, invention of new euphemistic expressions will be required. As long as cultural taboos and unpleasant topics continue to exist, people will have to continue using euphemistic expressions to be effective communicators. As a matter of fact, people would not be able to use a language effectively without euphemisms. Communication would often be strained and uncomfortable without them. For these reasons it is to be perceptibly accepted that euphemisms are inevitable in communication and language teaching and learning.

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