The Characteristics and Pragmatic Strategies of English Euphemism

XU Xiuying, WEN Jiangtao
Zhoukou Normal University, Zhoukou, China

Some words may cause embarrassment in daily communication, and euphemism is a language type to avoid embarrassment. Euphemism is widely used in English expression. On the basis of exploring the characteristics of English euphemism in times, regionalism, register, and nationality, this paper discusses in detail the pragmatic functions of English euphemism from four dimensions, namely taboo, politeness, positivity, and concealment, in order to provide guidance for the proper use of English euphemism.

Keywords: English euphemism, characteristic structure, pragmatic functions

Introduction and Development of English Euphemism

As a common language phenomenon in the world culture, euphemism has the greatest advantage of avoiding embarrassment in communication, replacing words that may cause unhappiness or dissatisfaction, and using more implicit and euphemistic words to play the role of communicative expression. English euphemism has become an integral part of English culture and is also one of the basic components of English. It is necessary to study the characteristics and pragmatic functions of euphemism in intercultural communication so as to interpret the linguistic phenomenon and language culture well. English euphemism has a long history of development. Most euphemism is derived from the Bible. Euphemism is derived from Greek; its prefix EU means “good, soundly”, while the root “phemism” means “speech or saying”, so it is “good speech” when combined. According to The Random House College Dictionary, euphemism is the substitution of a mild indirect, or vague expression for one thought to be offensive, harsh, or blunt. This also shows that euphemism is reserved and pleasant. In the United States, many writers refer to “euphemism” as “gilded words” or “makeup words”, which is a more vivid description of euphemism. The use of euphemism in the UK can be traced back to a longer time. There was euphemism as early as the 11th century, and the euphemism at that time was called “elegant word”. Based on the fact that human beings could not explain some natural phenomena, people held a reverent attitude towards the unknown and ghosts, so they tried to use euphemism to replace taboo words. As a result, some taboo words were euphemistically replaced by other words. With the development of the society, English euphemism has been developing constantly, showing its social function more fully. On the one hand, it has the effect of maintaining language taboos; on the other hand, it helps to maintain interpersonal relationship and ensure the pleasure of communication. To some extent, euphemism has become the embodiment of civilization in society.
Characteristics of English Euphemism

Epoch Characteristics of Euphemism

For the same thing, expressing the same meaning, in different times, euphemism expression is not the same. In some cases, some euphemisms are temporary, but with the expansion of their scope, they also become fixed euphemisms, which change with the development of The Times and gradually get enriched. This is the embodiment of the characteristics of euphemism in times. The most typical is the name given to black people. It was “Negor” at first, later it developed into Black People”, and then into “African American”. In fact, the change of name is the product of the changing background of The Times. At the beginning, the social status of black Americans was low, so the address of black Americans had a derogatory color. With the development of the African American human rights movement, their social status was improved, so the address of black people also changed.

Regional Characteristics of Euphemism

Influenced by different regions, their corresponding historical and cultural backgrounds are different, so the corresponding customs and taboos are also different. This also leads to the different expression of euphemism in different regions, which makes euphemism present certain regional characteristics. Condoms, for example, are euphemistically different in the UK and France. In the UK condoms are called “French letters”, meaning something French. In France, it is called “Capote anglaise”, which means something English. For the same thing that needs to be avoided, each region has completely opposite views. This is the best indication of its regional characteristics.

Register Features of Euphemism

In addition to regional features, euphemism also has register features. Register, as a sociolinguistic term, means the varieties according to use of language, i.e., the varieties of language that a person uses to express the same meaning in different ways on different occasions. Different speaker’s gender, age, status, and education level determine the different contexts in which euphemism is used. Therefore, the expression of the same meaning may be affected by the register and there are different euphemistic expressions. Taking toilet manners as an example, men would say “to rear”, while women would use “to powder one’s nose”. A child tends to say “wee-wee”; “go to rest room” or “wash one’s hands” are generally adopted by adults; a colloquial expression is “to spend a penny”; “answer the nature’s call” is used with a hint of humor; “do one’s business” is a slang; and “perform certain necessary function of the body” is solemn written language. As for menstruation in English, female students would say “I’m having my periods or I have my rags on again”, while American female athletes euphemistically prefer to use “Game called off, Muddy field”, and more direct expressions would be preferred by doctors, “She is bleeding” or “She is in her catamenia”. Therefore, it’s quite necessary to choose different euphemisms according to different contexts to ensure that the expression is more tactful and decent.

National Characteristics of Euphemism

Although English euphemism is a common phenomenon in culture, different countries and nations have different historical and cultural traditions and natural environments, so euphemism has significant differences in its use. Euphemism has strong national characteristics. Different modes of production and different cultural concepts make the national characteristics of euphemism more obvious. For example, Chinese old people tend to be frank and blunt when asking their age, and sometimes in order to show “familiarity or respect” they are used to adding “Lao” (old) in front of the surname, “How old are you, Lao Wang/Lao Li?” If “Lao” is placed
after the surname, such as “Wang Lao” and “Li Lao”, it can not only show the age of the addressee, but also contain more respect. But such honorific titles do not work in English. Because in the eyes of British and Americans, “old” is a synonym for “useless”, with a hint of irony. And asking age is considered to be an uncivilized act of prying into other people’s privacy, which is easy to antagonize people. Therefore, people prefer to use “senior” or “advanced in age” instead of “old”.

In addition, in Chinese, an ideal commodity is generally described as “fine and cheap”, while “cheap” in contemporary English means “poor quality and bad style”, so “economy, budget, low-cost, and realistically priced” are often expressed as their viable options. Therefore, it is necessary to grasp the national characteristics when using euphemism.

Pragmatic Strategy Analysis of English Euphemisms

Taboo Avoidance Function of English Euphemisms

In ancient times, people held a reverent attitude towards nature, the unknown, and the gods, and some tribes converted it into specific beliefs. They worshiped the natural gods blindly. In order to avoid the occurrence of disasters, they often held large sacrificial activities to praise the gods. Some words and languages were forbidden to be used. This is the taboo function of English euphemism. Specific avoidance is reflected in four aspects. One is the euphemism for death. Every country has a taboo on death, so euphemisms are often used when expressing death. Rather than talking about death directly, they prefer to say “to be called to God” or “to have found rest”. Second, euphemism of disease and other aspects. It is considered unlucky to have illness and death alike, and to talk about it directly is a sign of bad manners. Some special diseases such as venereal diseases are called social diseases. And hemorrhoids are called a problem skin, a phrase that avoids embarrassment. The third is the euphemism of older age. Age is a private issue in the UK, especially for older people and women. So, the elderly are more likely to be referred to as the mature. The fourth is the euphemism of some special profession. In the UK, low-paid or special jobs are considered taboo, which also needs euphemism. For example, a funeral home worker is called an undertaker.

Politeness Functions of English Euphemisms

Another function of euphemism is to avoid rudeness and indecency in communication. When unpleasant things have to be involved, euphemism should be chosen to avoid hurting the feelings of the other party. In real life, due to improper language, even rude language caused by unnecessary misunderstanding, friction, resulting in interpersonal tension, is not uncommon examples. This is enough to illustrate the importance of politeness in language use. Therefore, in daily communication, out of respect for the other party, people prefer to indicate tactfully for the other party’s shortcomings and mistakes, or for the other party’s opposite point of view. People tend to use implicit language to judge others, which helps to build a polite and friendly communication atmosphere, making the communication between the two sides always happy and harmonious. This is also the expression of self-cultivation.

This function of euphemism is consistent with Leech’s Politeness Principle, which provides a basis for the application of euphemism in language communication. As poor people are looked down upon in English, and the notion of poverty tends to offend people, the euphemism “disadvantaged, deprived, and underprivileged” is used instead. In addition, speakers try to avoid direct mention of certain bodily functions, sex, diseases, and other related things, and euphemism is also applicable to the principle of politeness.
Positive Functions of English Euphemisms

Positive functions are also known as beautification functions. It uses the characteristics of fuzzy expression in English euphemism to convey those words that are difficult and inconvenient to say, and uses more euphemistic and implicit words to replace embarrassing and negative words, so that the language expression is more positive and plays a role of beautification. Such euphemism can avoid the communication friction caused by blunt and straightforward language and play a lubricating role in communicative expression. In the UK, English euphemisms have obvious advantages in beautifying occupations with low social status and effectively meet the needs of people to maintain self-esteem. However, for the groups with personality defects or physical defects, euphemism can be used to avoid unnecessary personal stimulation and harm. For example, a garbage collector is usually called a “sanitary engineer”, “an engineer of city sanitation”. A barber is called a “beautician”. As for underachieving students, “she is working at her own level” or “she can do better work with help” is more indirect and less offensive than saying “slow” or “stupid”.

Camouflage Function of English Euphemisms

In fact, for some social problems or substantive problems, euphemisms are habitually used to disguise the expression, especially to cover up poverty, crime, and other serious social problems, or to cover up the nature of the war or political and diplomatic scandals. Sometimes euphemism indicates a deferent meaning which is always vague. The vague meaning is propagated and promoted to help some groups conceal the expression. “Violence”, for example, is always referred to as “action”. “Eavesdropping” is expressed as “intelligence gathering”. Thus, some sensitive issues are cleverly disguised. Another prominent example is that, in English, poor country is originally called “underdeveloped nation”, later “developing nations”, recently “emerging nations”. And the United Nations refers to them as “less-developed countries”. Ultimately, these are euphemisms for the notion of a “poor country”.

Conclusion

To sum up, English euphemism, as a component of the English language, is widely used in daily life with rich functions, but it is also complicated to use. This is determined by its nationality, times, region, and register characteristics. Therefore, we should not only understand the characteristics and pragmatic strategies of English euphemism, use English euphemism correctly and properly, and grasp different principles of using euphemism, but also make a good understanding of different cultures and customs of different societies and ethnic groups, and make English euphemism add color to our daily communication.

References

Halliday, M. A. K. (1978). Language as social semiotic. The social interpretation of language and meaning. London: Edward Arnold Ltd.

Jiang, Z. J. (2016). A pragmatic analysis of English euphemism and its implications for English teaching. Afterschool Education in China, 10(30), 93+95.

Leech, G. N. (1983). Principles of pragmatics. London and New York: Longman Group Ltd.

Li, D. (2009). On the characteristics and communicative functions of euphemism in English. Journal of Liaoning Academy of Governance, 11(7), 152-153.

Wu, S. M., & Yang, S. X. (2009). Euphemism in English and its functional quality and goal. Journal of Harbin University, 30(10), 116-118.