

A Comparative Study of Chinese, Japanese and English Euphemisms from the Perspective of Sociolinguistics

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Abstract

English euphemism is not only a kind of linguistic phenomenon but also a kind of social and cultural phenomenon. From the perspective of sociolinguistics, this paper employs the literature research method and the case analysis method to conduct a comparative study of euphemisms in Chinese, Japanese, and English. The research reveals that euphemisms in these three languages share certain commonalities while also demonstrating marked differences in terms of indirectness, temporality, nationality, and regionality. At the same time, euphemisms serve multiple social functions such as avoidance, politeness, concealment, and humor. This study aims to provide some reference for the re-search on euphemisms from the perspective of sociolinguistics.

Keywords

Sociolinguistics; Euphemism; Social Functions

1. Introduction

Euphemism, a distinct linguistic phenomenon ubiquitous across languages, profoundly reflects socio-cultural values. In the context of globalization, frequent exchanges between China, Japan, and English-speaking nations have fostered in-depth cooperation and interaction across numerous domains including politics, economics, and culture. As a unique component of the language system endowed with rich cultural connotations, euphemism holds significant importance.

Sociolinguistics is a discipline that employs linguistic and sociological theories and methods to examine linguistic phenomena in relation to societal contexts. The sociocultural factors it investigates, including social class, gender, age, regional culture and religious beliefs, exert an extremely important driving role in the emergence and development of euphemisms. This paper aims to conduct a comparative study on euphemisms in the Chinese, Japanese, and English languages. By employing the literature review method and case analysis method, it intends to reveal the similarities

ties and differences of these euphemisms from a sociolinguistic perspective, as well as their underlying cultural connotations.

This paper helps enrich and deepen research on euphemisms in the field of sociolinguistics, and further reveals the close connection between language and culture. Besides this paper facilitates an in-depth understanding of the role and significance of language in society, and provides theoretical support and practical guidance for language use and language policy-making. Additionally, it enables language learners and users to gain a deeper understanding of the differences in euphemisms across different cultural contexts, thereby promoting mutual understanding and respect between different cultures.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics, an emerging discipline that took shape in the United States during the 1960s, focuses on examining the interrelationships between language and society. It integrates theories and methodologies from linguistics, sociology, anthropology, psychology, history, and other disciplines, characterized by its inherently interdisciplinary nature and encompassing a broad scope and diverse range of research topics. It is generally recognized that sociolinguistics encompasses broad and narrow conceptions. The broad conception includes diverse aspects such as language variation, language communication, bilingualism and multilingualism, language contact, language shift, the ethnography of communication, language and cultural ideology, various societal relationships of language, language planning, language pedagogy, and language acquisition, among others. In contrast, the narrow conception is generally confined to the first six categories.

2.2. The Definition of Euphemism

The term “euphemism” derives from Ancient Greek. The prefix “eu” carries the meaning of “good, well”, while the root “pheme” denotes “to speak”; when combined, they convey the meaning of “comfortable words”. (Hu Xiaolin, 2013) Early linguistic scholar Chen Wangdao (1932) defined euphemism as a circumlocutory expression wherein speakers circumvent direct articulation of their intended meaning, instead employing indirect and implicit language to evoke suggestive implications. However, scholars including Li Junhua (2010) and Gu Tongqing (2015) maintain divergent perspectives, contending that euphemism transcends mere rhetorical strategy to constitute a distinct and multifaceted linguistic phenomenon. This paper draws on Shao Junhang’s (2016) conceptualization of euphemism as an indirect form of linguistic or verbal expression deliberately constructed by the information organizer, that is, the speaker or writer, through phonetic, semantic, grammatical, or related mechanisms within a particular context. It is used in reference to subjects capable of evoking negative psychological responses such as fear, alarm, shame, inferiority,

guilt, discomfort, or other forms of distress, with the intention of preventing emotional or psychological discomfort for both the producer and the recipient, namely the reader or listener, of the message. In addition, according to Shu Dingfang (1995), in a narrow sense, euphemisms refer to euphemistic expressions, which are generally conventionalized words or phrases that have been widely adopted by the majority within a specific community or context over time. In the broad sense, euphemism denotes expressive methods with euphemistic functions, which are temporarily constructed through various linguistic devices (e.g., negation, tense, and voice) or discourse devices (e.g., text). This paper will conduct its exploration based on euphemism in the broad sense.

2.3. Relevant Studies on Euphemism

As a key research topic in linguistics, euphemism has attracted the attention of numerous scholars, resulting in a wealth of relevant research findings. Scholars have conducted in-depth analyses of euphemisms from various perspectives. Huang Ke (2021) explored the types, composition, and functions of death euphemisms in Chinese, as well as international students' awareness of using such euphemisms. Sun Qiankun (2008) summarized the forms of euphemistic expressions based on the part-of-speech classification of Japanese, and examined the causes of their formation from cultural perspectives such as the living environment and ideological awareness of the Japanese people.

Furthermore, scholars including Zhou Bolan (2009), Cai Yingying (2012), and Hu Xiaolin (2013) have analyzed euphemisms from a sociolinguistic perspective. Among them, Cai Yingying specifically examined death euphemisms within the broader category of euphemisms.

In the field of comparative studies on euphemisms, Ji Jie (2015) conducted a sociolinguistic analysis of age-related euphemisms in English and Chinese, while Wang Siyu (2018) conducted a comparative study on Chinese - English death euphemisms and put forward pedagogical suggestions. Li Jie (2024) carried out a comparative analysis of English-Chinese euphemisms from the aspects of greetings and death. Domestically, there are relatively few research findings on the comparison of Chinese-Japanese euphemisms. Jia Jianmei (2010) analyzed Chinese-Japanese euphemisms by comparing them in three aspects: composition, culture, and pragmatics. Liao Chen (2017) conducted a study on the comparison of Chinese-Japanese euphemisms and the translation errors made by Japanese international students. In recent years, scholars have further expanded the scope of comparative studies on euphemisms, and Baginskaya Elena (2020) conducted a comparative study on the types of Russian - Chinese - English euphemisms and proposed suggestions for Chinese euphemism teaching. This paper attempts to conduct an exploration of Chinese, Japanese, and English euphemisms from a sociolinguistic perspective on the basis of previous studies.

3. Analysis of Characteristics of Chinese, Japanese, English Euphemisms

This paper integrates the research findings of Zhou Bolan (2009) and Đặng Thùy Linh (2024) and, from a sociolinguistic perspective, categorizes the features of euphemisms into the following four types: indirectness, temporality, nationality, and regionality.

3.1. Indirectness

The indirectness of euphemisms refers to the avoidance of direct reference to sensitive or offensive content; instead, circuitous and implicit ways of expression are adopted, thereby making it easier for people to accept the message.

3.1.1. Similarities

In Chinese, Japanese, and English, euphemisms are used to avoid direct expressions of sensitive topics that may cause discomfort. For instance, when discussing the topic of death, Chinese uses expressions such as “去世”(qùshì), “逝世”(shìshì), and “走了”(zǒu le) instead of directly saying “死”(sǐ). Japanese employs euphemistic phrases like “お亡くなりになる” and “他界される”. Likewise, English frequently uses indirect expressions such as “pass away,” “depart,” or “go to a better place,” thereby avoiding the use of the word “die.”

Regarding private topics such as physiological excretion, euphemistic terms are employed across cultures. In Chinese, expressions like “去洗手间”(qù xǐshǒujiān) and “方便一下”(fāngbiàn yíxià) are used. Similarly, Japanese employs phrases such as “お手洗いに行く” and “お通じ”. Likewise, English uses indirect expressions including “go to the bathroom,” “powder one’s nose” (primarily for women), and “answer the call of nature,” all of which avoid direct reference to the associated physiological acts.

3.1.2. Differences

The manifestations and degrees of indirectness in euphemisms vary across the three languages. Chinese euphemisms frequently rely on cultural allusions and metaphors. For instance, the term “采薪之忧”(cǎixīn zhī yōu) alludes to falling ill. Derived from classical literary traditions, this term uses the imagery of “being unable to gather firewood” to euphemistically imply physical ailment. Its indirectness is markedly high, and it is deeply rooted in cultural heritage.

The indirectness of Japanese euphemisms is more prominently reflected in the ambiguity and implicitness of the language. Japanese contains numerous vague expressions. For instance, when declining an invitation, one might say, “今回はちょっと都合が悪いです”, which translates literally to “This time it’s a little inconvenient.” This formulation omits the specific reason for refusal, thereby preserving the interlocutor’s face while conveying a polite decline. Thus, the indirectness in Japanese is largely achieved through strategic semantic vagueness.

The indirectness of English euphemisms tends to employ relatively concrete substitute words or phrases. For example, the word “portly” may be used in place of “fat.” Such substitutes retain a semantic connection to the original word while achieving a higher degree of tact and social acceptability.

3.2. Temporality

The temporality of euphemisms reflects the transformation of language over time. Factors such as social culture and values in different eras all exert an impact on the use and development of euphemisms.

3.2.1. Similarities

Euphemisms in Chinese, Japanese, and English have undergone constant evolution alongside societal development. Shifts in social attitudes render certain historical euphemisms obsolete, while new expressions continuously emerge to reflect contemporary sensibilities.

In ancient China’s feudal era, there were specific euphemistic expressions for the emperor’s death, such as “驾崩” (jià bēng)、“晏驾” and “晏驾”(yàn jià). These terms reflected the reverence for the emperor under the feudal hierarchy. However, with the collapse of the feudal system, more universal and egalitarian expressions like “逝世” and “去世” are generally used in modern society. Similarly, certain feudal-era euphemistic terms for women, such as “贱内”(jiànnèi)and “拙荆”(zhuōjīng), which conveyed patriarchal norms, are now rarely used in contemporary discourse. They have been replaced by more respectful and equal terms such as “妻子”(qīzi) and “爱人”(àirén), reflecting broader social progress toward gender equality and an emphasis on mutual respect in personal designations.

In ancient Japan, under a rigid social hierarchy, distinct euphemisms were used to refer to the death of individuals based on their social status. For example, the term “薨去” (kōkyo) was reserved for individuals of high nobility, while “物故” (buko) was applied to common people. With social progress and the gradual erosion of the class system, these strictly differentiated euphemisms have largely fallen out of common usage. In contemporary Japanese, more universal expressions such as “お亡くなりになる” are widely employed to denote death, reflecting a broader societal movement toward linguistic equality and modern sensibilities.

Similarly, in English, euphemisms referring to occupations have also evolved. For instance, the term “maid” was historically replaced by the more polite expression “domestic help.” While this euphemism remains in use today, even more neutral terms such as “housekeeper” are increasingly preferred in contemporary usage.

3.2.2. Differences

The pace and direction of euphemistic evolution vary across the three languages. For Chinese euphemisms, their evolution is influenced by major social transformations in China, and their evolutionary speed is sometimes relatively fast. For in-

stance, following the Reform and Opening-up Policy, the influx of new concepts and social phenomena led to swift updates in economically related euphemisms. The shift from “下岗” (xià gǎng, “laid-off”) to “再就业” (zài jiùyè, “re-employment”) and later to “灵活就业” (líng huó jiùyè, “flexible employment”) reflects evolving perspectives on work and employment.

The evolution of Japanese euphemisms proceeds relatively steadily and is shaped by dual influences from traditional culture and foreign cultures. When absorbing Western culture, it undergoes localized integration. For example, when making suggestions, a traditional expression might be “もしよろしければ、この方法をご検討いただけたらと思います”, which employs complex honorifics and indirect phrasing. After the integration of Western culture, one might say “このアイデアを考えてみてはいかがですか”, and this expression is more concise and clear while still maintaining politeness.

The evolution of English euphemisms is significantly influenced by globalization and multiculturalism, leading to relatively rapid change and diversification. With increased communication and integration among different cultural groups, euphemisms related to race and cultural differences continue to emerge. For example, “African-American” and “Black people” have replaced the outdated and offensive “Negro”. Meanwhile, popular culture exerts a notable impact on English euphemisms. Following the global success of the Harry Potter series, the word “Muggle” became widely known and used. This term originally refers to ordinary people without magical abilities in the Harry Potter universe, but now in popular culture, it is now often employed euphemistically to refer to people unfamiliar with or lacking skill in a particular area.

3.3. Nationality

The nationality of euphemisms reflects the uniqueness of different ethnic groups in terms of culture, history, values, and other aspects, which is distinctly manifested in Chinese, Japanese, and English euphemisms.

3.3.1. Similarities

Throughout history, certain euphemisms are universal across different ethnic cultures. For example, when expressing the concept of death, all three languages possess euphemisms that reflect their respective ethnic traditions of respecting life and revering death, demonstrating a shared humanistic concern for the value of life and its end. Furthermore, from the perspective of values, euphemisms in all three languages reflect a common emphasis on showing respect for others.

3.3.2. Differences

The differences in euphemisms are reflected in the variations in their cultural origins and value orientations.

Chinese euphemisms often incorporate philosophical ideas and values derived from

religious culture. The Chinese adhere to Taoism and Buddhism. The Taoist view of nature influences euphemistic expressions related to topics such as life and death, exemplified by terms like “羽化”(yǔhuà) and “归真”(guīzhēn). Expressions such as “坐化”(zuòhuà) and “成佛”(chéngfó) are associated with Buddhism. Two core religious traditions in Japan, Buddhism and Shintoism, have exerted profound and enduring influence on the formation of Japanese euphemisms, shaping how sensitive topics are framed in daily and formal discourse. Expressions such as “成仏”(jōbutsu), “仏となる”(hotoke to naru), and “遷化”(senge) are all used euphemistically to refer to “death”. Furthermore, the animism of Shintoism has led to the frequent appearance of expressions related to natural deities in Japanese euphemisms. For example, “神様の怒り”(kamisama no ikari) is used euphemistically to refer to natural disasters. In English-speaking countries, Christianity is the predominant faith. Death is often viewed as departing to a better place or repaying a natural debt, as reflected in expressions like “have gone to a better world,” “be promoted to glory,” and “pay the debt of nature.”

3.4. Regionality

The regionality of euphemisms reflects differences in language use across geographic areas, with both similarities and differences observed in Chinese, Japanese, and English euphemisms.

3.4.1. Similarities

In Chinese, in the southwestern regions such as Sichuan and Chongqing, people often use “有了”(yǒu le) or “怀起了”(huái qǐ le) to refer to pregnancy, while in the Hakka dialect, the term “身命”(shēn mìng) is used. In Japanese, when expressing gratitude, people in Tokyo tend to use more formal expression, such as “ありがとうございます”. In contrast, in Osaka, people often prefer more casual and locally distinctive phrases like “おおきに” or a simpler “ありがとう”, reflecting the warmer and more direct communicative style of the Kansai region. In British English, the “stout” and “plump” are used euphemistically to describe someone as overweight. In American English, however, terms like “big-boned” or “plus-sized” are commonly used for the similar meaning. In Australian English, people may say “solid” for this purpose.

3.4.2. Differences

The degree of regionality in euphemisms differs among Chinese, Japanese, and English.

Chinese euphemisms exhibit a relatively high degree of regional differences, because of China’s vast territory and the large number of dialects. In contrast, Japanese exhibits relatively limited regional variation in euphemistic usage. Although certain areas possess distinctive euphemistic expressions, the euphemistic system in Japa-

nese remains largely unified overall. This can be attributed to Japan's smaller land area, consistent language policies, and homogeneous cultural dissemination. The regional variation in English is more complex due to its widespread use across multiple countries and regions. Notable differences exist among British English, American English, Australian English, and other varieties, with additional intra-country regional distinctions. For example, some euphemisms in American English originate from immigrant cultures and retain unique characteristics. Italian-American communities might use "sleep with the fishes" to euphemistically indicate that someone has been murdered.

4. Social Functions of Chinese, Japanese, English Euphemisms

Euphemisms have diverse social functions in different socio-cultural contexts. Based on the research findings of Zhou Bolan (2009), Hu Xiaolin (2013), and Đặng Thị Thùy Linh (2024), this paper classifies the social functions of these three types of euphemisms into four categories: the avoidance function, the politeness function, the concealment function, and the humor function.

4.1. The Avoidance Function

In human society, there exist certain topics regarded as taboo or sensitive, such as death, illness, excretion, and private body parts. Direct discussion of these topics is often considered impolite or even offensive. Therefore, people tend to use euphemisms, which creates a more harmonious communication atmosphere and in turn facilitates smooth exchanges.

4.2. The Politeness Function

The politeness function of euphemisms is reflected in their ability to preserve the face of both interlocutors and promote harmonious interpersonal relationships. When people are compelled to refer to unpleasant matters, they often opt for euphemistic expressions to avoid causing offense or hurt. This motivation finds its theoretical foundation in Leech's Politeness Principle.

4.3. The Concealment Function

One key reason people use euphemisms in communication is their inherent ambiguity, which allows them to maximize the concealment of factual information. Within the political sphere, euphemisms abound in Chinese, Japanese, and English, functioning to disguise politically sensitive topics or incidents. For instance, in Chinese, the phrase "社会现象" (shèhuì xiànxàng) meaning social phenomenon may be employed to refer to certain sensitive sociopolitical concerns. In Japanese, expressions such as "特定の事情" (tokutei no jijō) translated as special circumstances might be used to gloss over the details of politically charged incidents. Similarly, in English, authorities may refer to a disaster merely as an "event" in order to down-

play the severity of the occurrence.

4.4. The Humor Function

Many euphemisms infuse language with vitality and interest through humorous expressions. In Chinese, Japanese, and English, there are numerous humorous euphemisms used to tease or satirize certain phenomena or individuals. For instance, when teasing someone about their weight gain, one might state “你最近发福了”(nǐ zuìjìn fāfú le) instead of directly saying “你胖了”(nǐ pàng le). In Japanese, “お忙しさま” may be used to satirize someone who is so busy that they neglect others. Similarly in the television series *Friends*, Chandler, when joking about his ordinary job, says, “I’m in a very, very specialized field. I’m in statistical analysis and data reconfiguration.”

5. Conclusion

From a sociolinguistic perspective, this study investigates the similarities, differences, and intrinsic cultural connotations of euphemisms among the Chinese, Japanese, and English languages. The study finds that euphemisms in these three languages share both commonalities and differences in aspects such as avoiding sensitive topics, reflecting the changes of the times, embodying national cultures and values, and demonstrating regional differences. Additionally, these euphemisms undertake multiple social functions, including avoidance, politeness, concealment, and humor. Future research can further refine the classification of euphemisms, strengthen data collection and analysis, and conduct empirical investigations simultaneously, so as to more comprehensively reveal the usage and changing trends of euphemisms among different social groups.

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