

# A Contrastive Study of English and Chinese Euphemisms in Interpersonal Communication

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## Abstract

Euphemism, a key linguistic tool in interpersonal communication, maintains harmony by avoiding offensive expressions. This study contrasts English and Chinese euphemisms in interpersonal communication using Brown and Levinson's Politeness Principle and Hofstede's cultural value dimensions (e.g., individualism-collectivism). Adopting qualitative interpretation, the study analyzes euphemisms from daily, workplace, and healthcare interactions, comparing them in linguistic strategies (lexical substitution, metaphor), pragmatic functions (face-saving, taboo avoidance), and cultural roots. Key findings: 1) Both follow the Politeness Principle, but English prioritizes individual face (negative face) with indirect lexical substitution, while Chinese emphasizes collective harmony via context-dependent implicit expressions; 2) Cultural values shape practices—English reflects individualism/low power distance (e.g., “aging” euphemisms), Chinese mirrors collectivism/high power distance (e.g., hierarchical address euphemisms).

## Keywords

Contrastive Study; Euphemism; Politeness; Interpersonal Communication

## 1. Introduction

Interpersonal communication lies at the heart of human social interaction, with language serving as the principal medium through which individuals convey their thoughts, feelings, and intentions. Euphemisms, as a prevalent linguistic phenomenon, play a crucial role in this process. As defined by linguists, a euphemism involves substituting an expression that may cause offense or imply something unpleasant with one that is more agreeable or inoffensive (Crystal, 1997). For instance, instead of bluntly stating “dead” people commonly use the euphemism “passed away”, which softens the harshness of the message.

Throughout history, euphemisms have been employed for diverse purposes. In certain cases, they represent well-intended efforts to be courteous, aiming to convey information in a more palatable manner. They function as a “buffer” in communication, enabling speakers to discuss sensitive topics such as death, sex, or

bodily functions without causing discomfort (Hughes, 2010). However, euphemisms can also be exploited for less noble motives, such as deception or obfuscation.

In the context of cross-cultural communication between English and Chinese speakers, understanding euphemisms becomes even more crucial. English and Chinese, as two major languages with distinct cultural backgrounds, are bound to exhibit differences in their euphemistic expressions. Despite the existing body of research on euphemisms in general, a comprehensive contrastive study of English and Chinese euphemisms in interpersonal communication from the perspective of the politeness principle and cultural values remains relatively scarce.

The politeness principle, initially proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) in their seminal work on universals in language usage related to politeness phenomena, and further elaborated by Leech (1983) in his principles of pragmatics, offers a theoretical framework for analyzing how speakers utilize language to mitigate face-threatening acts. Brown and Levinson's theory posits that politeness is a fundamental aspect of human interaction, with positive politeness emphasizing common interests and solidarity, and negative politeness focusing on minimizing impositions. Their work has been widely influential in the field of pragmatics, providing insights into how individuals navigate social interactions (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Leech, on the other hand, lists six maxims, including tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, and sympathy, which vary across cultures (Leech, 1983). The study by Gu (1990), has also explored the application of these politeness principles in different cultural contexts, highlighting the need for a cross-cultural examination of euphemisms.

Cultural values, as conceptualized by Hofstede (1980) in his groundbreaking research on international differences in work-related values, also significantly impact language use. His framework, which encompasses dimensions such as individualism-collectivism and power distance, aids in explaining how cultural norms shape communication patterns. For example, in individualistic cultures like the United States, euphemisms may be more centered around individual face-saving, while in collectivist cultures like China, group harmony and the face of the collective are prioritized (Hofstede, 1980).

This study aims to fill the research gap by conducting a detailed contrastive analysis of English and Chinese euphemisms in interpersonal communication. By exploring the linguistic realization strategies, pragmatic functions, and cultural roots of euphemisms in both languages, it not only enriches the field of cross-cultural pragmatics but also offers practical guidance for cross-cultural communicators. By understanding the cultural logic underlying euphemistic choices, individuals can reduce misunderstandings and enhance the effectiveness of their interactions in multicultural settings.

## 2. Research Background and Research Questions

## 2.1. Research Background

Euphemism studies have long attracted scholarly attention, with existing research primarily focusing on three dimensions: semantic evolution, pragmatic functions, and cultural correlations. In the context of single-language studies, scholars have explored how euphemisms adapt to social norms and cultural values, for example, analyzing the use of euphemisms for “aging” in English to reflect societal attitudes toward the elderly (Lakoff, 2004) and examining how Chinese euphemisms for “illness” are shaped by traditional concepts of “avoiding misfortune” (Xu, 2021). These studies have laid a solid foundation for understanding euphemistic practices in individual languages but lack systematic cross-linguistic comparison, especially between English and Chinese.

Cross-cultural euphemism research has made preliminary progress in recent years. Gu (1990) pointed out in his study of Chinese politeness phenomena that Chinese euphemisms often prioritize “interpersonal harmony” over individual expression, which differs from English euphemisms focus on “respecting personal boundaries”. Similarly, Mao (1994) compared face-saving strategies in English and Chinese euphemisms, noting that English euphemisms tend to mitigate “negative face threats” (e.g., avoiding imposing on others), while Chinese euphemisms are more concerned with protecting “positive face” (e.g., maintaining group solidarity). However, these studies either focus narrowly on specific scenarios (e.g., only daily conversations) or rely on qualitative analysis of limited examples, failing to systematically explore how politeness principles and cultural values jointly shape euphemistic choices across multiple interpersonal communication contexts.

Furthermore, recent empirical studies have highlighted gaps in current research. Deng (2015) conducted a corpus-based analysis of euphemisms in English and Chinese workplace communication and found that existing contrastive studies rarely link linguistic realization strategies (e.g., lexical substitution vs. implicit implication) to cultural value dimensions (e.g., individualism vs. collectivism). Xu (2021) also noted that most studies on euphemisms and politeness principles focus on theoretical deductions rather than verifying hypotheses through empirical data, leading to a lack of practical guidance for cross-cultural communicators.

Against this backdrop, there is an urgent need for a comprehensive contrastive study of English and Chinese euphemisms in interpersonal communication. This study will integrate politeness theory and cultural value frameworks, use scenario-based case studies, and cover three core interpersonal communication scenarios (daily social interactions, workplace communication, and healthcare consultations) to fill the aforementioned research gaps.

## 2.2. Research Questions

Based on the research background and gaps identified above, this study proposes three core research questions to guide the analysis:

RQ1: What are the differences in linguistic realization strategies of English and Chinese euphemisms in interpersonal communication?

RQ2: How do politeness principles (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Leech, 1983) explain the pragmatic function differences of English and Chinese euphemisms?

RQ3: To what extent do cultural values (Hofstede, 1980; Ting-Toomey, 1999) shape the divergence of English and Chinese euphemistic practices? Specifically, how do individualism-collectivism and power distance influence the selection of euphemisms in the two languages?

These research questions are designed to be hierarchical and mutually complementary: RQ1 focuses on surface-level linguistic differences, RQ2 explores middle-level pragmatic mechanisms (politeness principles), and RQ3 digs into deep-level cultural roots. Together, they form a complete analytical framework to systematically compare English and Chinese euphemisms and achieve the study's objectives.

### 3. Methodology

To address the three core research questions (RQ1-RQ3) without relying on external corpora or inaccessible resources, this study adopts a discourse case-based analysis design, focusing on extracting and analyzing typical euphemistic utterance from three core interpersonal communication scenarios. This approach prioritizes the accessibility and authenticity of research materials, using naturally occurring, observable utterance cases to explore linguistic strategies, politeness functions, and cultural roots of English and Chinese euphemisms (Gu, 1990; Xiaoling et al, 2012).

The design follows a scenario-driven case selection framework: first, define the three target scenarios (daily social interactions, workplace communication, healthcare consultations) that are rich in euphemistic usage; second, collect representative euphemistic utterance cases from each scenario (ensuring cases are authentic and contextually complete); finally, analyze the cases through the lenses of linguistic realization strategies (RQ1), politeness principles (RQ2), and cultural values (RQ3). This design eliminates reliance on external databases or tools, making the research feasible with only firsthand or publicly observable utterance materials (Yang, 2023).

#### 3.1. Daily Social Interactions

Daily social interaction represents one of the most common contexts in which euphemisms are used, particularly when speakers need to address sensitive or potentially face-threatening topics. In this study, daily social interactions refer to informal communication among family members, friends, neighbors, and acquaintances. The cases selected for analysis focus primarily on topics such as death, financial difficulties, aging, illness, and other matters that may cause emotional discomfort or social embarrassment if expressed directly.

For the English-language cases, representative utterances are selected from naturally occurring informal conversations and publicly observable discourse materials, such as personal blogs and online community discussions. For example, when referring to the death of a family member, a speaker may say, “My grandma is in a better place now” rather than explicitly stating that “My grandma died.” Similarly, a speaker experiencing financial difficulties may say, “We are facing some financial challenges” instead of directly saying, “We are poor.” In discussions concerning age, expressions such as “senior” may be preferred over more direct terms that explicitly emphasize old age. These examples demonstrate how English euphemisms can soften potentially unpleasant information and reduce the degree of directness in interpersonal communication.

For the Chinese-language cases, the study examines naturally occurring utterances produced by native Mandarin speakers in comparable everyday situations. To ensure consistency in the cross-linguistic comparison, all Chinese examples are presented in Hanyu Pinyin rather than Chinese characters. For instance, when referring to the death of a family member, a speaker may say, “Yeye zou le” rather than directly stating that the person “si le.” When discussing financial difficulties, a speaker may use the expression “Zui jin shou tou you dian jin” instead of directly saying that they have little or no money. Other examples may involve euphemistic expressions concerning illness, aging, or other socially sensitive subjects. These utterances illustrate how speakers may rely on indirectness, metaphorical expressions, or culturally conventionalized phrases to avoid excessive directness and maintain interpersonal harmony.

The English and Chinese cases are selected according to comparable communicative situations rather than on the basis of literal lexical equivalence. This approach makes it possible to examine not only the linguistic forms through which euphemistic meanings are realized, but also the communicative purposes underlying their use. Particular attention is therefore paid to how speakers modify potentially sensitive information, manage the interlocutor’s face, and maintain appropriate interpersonal relationships. The selected cases subsequently serve as the primary materials for examining the linguistic realization strategies in RQ1, the politeness functions in RQ2, and the influence of cultural values in RQ3.

### 3.2. Workplace Communication

Workplace communication provides an important context for the study of euphemism because organizational interactions frequently involve sensitive issues such as job termination, workforce reduction, organizational restructuring, and performance evaluation. In such situations, speakers may avoid direct expressions in order to reduce the potential face threat associated with negative information. Previous research has demonstrated that euphemistic language is particularly prominent in organizational discourse surrounding downsizing and job loss. For

example, Vickers (2002), in a case study of organizational downsizing, examined how euphemistic and rhetorical expressions influenced employees' understanding of organizational changes. Her analysis illustrates how expressions such as "downsizing" and "rightsizing" can replace more direct references to the termination of employees, thereby presenting organizational restructuring in less threatening terms.

For the English-language cases, this study draws primarily on euphemistic expressions documented in previous research rather than constructing hypothetical workplace dialogues. Particular attention is paid to expressions associated with workforce reduction and organizational restructuring. Vickers (2002), for instance, discusses the use of terms such as "downsizing," "rightsizing," and "trimming" in organizational discourse. These expressions replace more direct descriptions of dismissing or laying off employees and therefore provide representative examples of how negative workplace events can be linguistically attenuated. Such cases are particularly relevant to RQ1 because they demonstrate lexical substitution and metaphorical framing as important strategies for euphemistic realization. They are also relevant to RQ2 because the indirect expressions can reduce the perceived harshness of face-threatening information and to RQ3 because their use reflects broader organizational and cultural attitudes toward employment and managerial authority.

For the Chinese-language cases, the study similarly draws on euphemistic expressions documented in published research on Chinese job termination and workplace communication. Yuniarto (2025), for example, conducted a corpus-based study of job termination euphemisms in Chinese economic news outlets, including the National Business Daily, China Business Network, and The Economic Daily. The study identified euphemistic expressions used to describe employment termination and analyzed their development in relation to cultural dimensions such as collectivism and power distance. These expressions provide a useful source of authentic Chinese workplace-related euphemisms because they occur in naturally produced public discourse rather than in researcher-constructed examples.

In addition to job termination, workplace euphemisms may occur in performance evaluation and professional criticism. Existing research on organizational communication suggests that negative feedback is often mitigated through indirect or less explicit formulations rather than blunt criticism. Such expressions can reduce the interpersonal impact of unfavorable evaluations while allowing managers to communicate the intended assessment. In the present study, however, examples are included only when they can be traced to published or otherwise identifiable sources; researcher-created examples are not treated as primary evidence.

### 3.3. Healthcare Consultations

Healthcare consultation represents a particularly sensitive context for the use of euphemistic language because communication between healthcare professionals, patients, and family members frequently involves illness, diagnosis, prognosis, treatment outcomes, and death. Directly communicating serious medical information may cause anxiety, emotional distress, or a perceived threat to the patient's or family's face. Consequently, healthcare professionals may employ euphemistic, indirect, or metaphorical expressions to make difficult information more acceptable while maintaining a supportive therapeutic relationship. Previous research has demonstrated that euphemisms are commonly used in medical consultations and that the choice between direct medical terminology and euphemistic expressions can influence patients' perceptions of illness. Tayler and Ogden (2005), for example, examined doctors' use of euphemisms when discussing heart failure and found that general practitioners often preferred less direct descriptions to the explicit term "heart failure." One documented euphemistic formulation was "fluid on your lungs as your heart is not pumping hard enough." Their experimental study further showed that patients responded differently depending on whether the condition was described using the medical term "heart failure" or the euphemistic formulation.

For the English-language cases, this study therefore draws on euphemistic expressions documented in previous research on doctor-patient communication. Particular attention is given to expressions used to describe serious illness and unfavorable medical conditions. The contrast between the explicit medical term "heart failure" and the euphemistic explanation "fluid on your lungs as your heart is not pumping hard enough," documented by Tayler and Ogden (2005), provides a representative example of lexical and explanatory substitution in clinical communication. Rather than presenting the diagnosis through a direct and potentially threatening medical label, the euphemistic formulation explains the physiological condition in relatively accessible and less emotionally charged language. This case is therefore relevant to RQ1 because it illustrates how medical euphemisms can be realized through descriptive reformulation, and to RQ2 because the reformulation may function to mitigate the interpersonal and emotional impact of unfavorable information.

For the Chinese-language cases, the study draws on research concerning the communication of serious illness and death in Chinese medical settings. Studies of Chinese healthcare communication have repeatedly identified indirectness and euphemism as important features of discussions concerning terminal illness and death. A qualitative study of Chinese medical teachers, for instance, reported that communication with patients was often characterized by euphemism and indirectness, particularly when practitioners discussed incurable illness and end-of-life care. The study also found that family members frequently played an important role in medical decision-making, which further shaped how sensitive

medical information was communicated.

More specifically, recent qualitative research on neonatal intensive care units in China provides directly documented examples of euphemistic expressions used by medical professionals when communicating neonatal death to family members. The study found that clinicians generally avoided explicitly using the word “death” and instead disclosed the information gradually. Documented expressions included “the child was not going to make it” and “had found relief,” which were used instead of directly saying that the child had died. Medical professionals also reported using metaphors to explain complex medical conditions and the process of dying to family members.

The selection of healthcare cases also takes cultural differences in the communication of serious illness and death into consideration. A systematic review of end-of-life communication in the Chinese context identified several recurring characteristics, including negative attitudes toward discussing dying, the treatment of end-of-life communication as a taboo topic, clinician-centered decision-making, and the prioritization of family expectations in prognosis disclosure. These findings suggest that euphemistic communication in Chinese healthcare settings cannot be understood solely as a strategy for linguistic politeness; it may also reflect culturally embedded expectations concerning family responsibility, emotional protection, and the appropriate disclosure of distressing information.

At the same time, the study avoids treating Chinese communication as uniformly indirect or assuming that all Chinese speakers avoid direct discussion of death. Research by Zhang (2022), for example, found that many older Chinese immigrants were willing to discuss death directly or through euphemisms, suggesting that attitudes toward death vary according to individual experience, context, and social background. This finding is important for the present analysis because it prevents cultural explanations from being reduced to simple national stereotypes.

## 4. Results

This chapter presents the qualitative findings of the discourse case-based analysis, addressing the three core research questions (RQ1–RQ3) through a contrastive examination of English and Chinese euphemisms in daily social interactions, workplace communication, and healthcare consultations. Rather than measuring the frequency or statistical distribution of euphemistic expressions, the analysis identifies recurring linguistic, pragmatic, and cultural patterns across the selected cases. The findings indicate that English and Chinese share the general communicative function of mitigating potentially sensitive or face-threatening information, while differing in the linguistic strategies through which such mitigation is achieved and in the cultural values that shape speakers’ preferences.

### 4.1. Linguistic Realization Strategies

The analysis reveals that both English and Chinese employ euphemism through several recurring linguistic strategies, including lexical substitution, metaphorical or figurative expression, descriptive reformulation, and indirect reference. These strategies frequently overlap, and a single euphemistic expression may simultaneously involve lexical substitution and metaphorical or contextual interpretation. Nevertheless, the comparison indicates differences in the relative prominence and communicative orientation of these strategies in the two languages. In the English cases, lexical substitution is one of the most clearly identifiable strategies. A direct expression with potentially negative or unpleasant connotations is replaced by a less threatening alternative. This pattern is particularly evident in workplace communication. Vickers (2002), for example, discusses organizational expressions such as “downsizing,” “rightsizing,” and “trimming” in relation to workforce reduction. Rather than explicitly foregrounding employee dismissal or job loss, these expressions frame the event as an organizational process or adjustment. The euphemistic substitution therefore modifies the linguistic presentation of the event while preserving its basic referential meaning.

A similar strategy occurs in everyday communication. Expressions such as “passed away” may replace the direct verb “died,” while expressions such as “senior” may be preferred to more explicit descriptions of old age. These cases suggest that English euphemism often operates through the selection of a lexical item that carries a lower degree of emotional or social markedness. The underlying meaning remains relatively transparent, allowing the hearer to recover the intended message without substantial contextual inference.

Metaphorical and figurative expression constitutes another important strategy in the English cases. Expressions referring to death through concepts such as departure or movement, for example, enable speakers to communicate the intended meaning without explicitly naming death. Such expressions create psychological distance between the speaker and the sensitive event. In healthcare communication, euphemistic expression may also involve a shift from a technical medical label to a descriptive formulation. Tayler and Ogden (2005) found that general practitioners preferred the formulation “fluid on your lungs as your heart is not pumping hard enough” to the direct medical term “heart failure.” Their findings demonstrate that descriptive reformulation can make a serious medical condition appear less threatening to patients.

Descriptive reformulation is particularly prominent in professional and healthcare contexts because these settings require speakers to communicate information while simultaneously managing its potential interpersonal consequences. In workplace discourse, terms such as “restructuring” or “streamlining” can shift attention away from the immediate negative consequences of organizational change and toward the organizational process itself. In healthcare discourse, a medical condition may similarly be explained through its symptoms or physiological processes rather than

through a direct diagnostic label. The linguistic form therefore allows speakers to preserve informational content while reducing the emotional force of the message. The Chinese cases demonstrate the same broad strategies but show a relatively strong reliance on indirect reference and culturally conventionalized expressions. In everyday interpersonal communication, speakers may use expressions whose intended euphemistic meanings depend heavily on context. For example, expressions such as *yéye zǒu le* may be understood as an indirect reference to the death of a grandfather, while *shǒu tou yǒu diǎn jīn* can indicate financial difficulty without explicitly describing the speaker as poor or lacking money. The literal meaning of these expressions does not necessarily reveal their full pragmatic meaning; interpretation depends on the communicative context and shared knowledge between interlocutors.

The Chinese healthcare cases similarly demonstrate the importance of indirectness when discussing serious illness and death. Research on healthcare communication has identified euphemism and indirectness as important resources for communicating sensitive medical information. Zhang and Tseng (2022), in their cross-cultural study of healthcare communication, examine the use of flexible and context-sensitive language in Chinese and English medical communication, including differences between Chinese and English communicative practices. Their findings provide further support for treating healthcare language as context-dependent rather than assuming that a single form of directness is appropriate across cultures.

A further difference concerns the degree of contextual dependence. English euphemisms identified in the present cases often maintain a relatively transparent semantic relationship with their referents. For example, “passed away” is readily interpreted as a reference to death, while “downsizing” clearly evokes organizational reduction or adjustment. Chinese euphemisms, particularly those used in informal interpersonal communication, may depend more strongly on shared cultural knowledge and situational context. Expressions such as *zǒu le* can acquire a euphemistic interpretation when the surrounding discourse concerns death, although the expression itself does not exclusively denote death.

Overall, the findings for RQ1 indicate that English and Chinese share several basic mechanisms of euphemistic realization, but their preferred forms are not identical. English cases show a relatively prominent use of lexical substitution, institutional reframing, and descriptive reformulation, whereas Chinese cases demonstrate a comparatively strong reliance on indirect reference, conventionalized expressions, and contextual interpretation. These differences constitute the linguistic foundation for the pragmatic differences discussed in the following section.

## 4.2. Pragmatic Functions and Politeness Principles

The analysis indicates that euphemism in both English and Chinese serves more

than the simple purpose of avoiding unpleasant vocabulary. Euphemistic expressions perform important pragmatic functions, including mitigating face-threatening acts, protecting the interlocutor's feelings, maintaining interpersonal relationships, and regulating the degree of directness in communication. These functions can be interpreted through the politeness frameworks proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) and Leech (1983).

One of the most prominent pragmatic functions is the mitigation of face-threatening acts. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), certain communicative acts potentially threaten the hearer's positive or negative face. Discussions of death, financial difficulty, job loss, poor performance, and serious illness are particularly likely to create such threats. Euphemism provides speakers with a linguistic means of reducing the force of these acts. Instead of communicating the sensitive information in its most direct form, speakers modify the expression so that the hearer has greater psychological and interpersonal space to process the message.

In English, the cases suggest that euphemism frequently operates through a combination of negative-politeness and positive-politeness concerns. Expressions such as "passed away" minimize the emotional harshness of discussing death, while workplace expressions such as "downsizing" avoid directly assigning responsibility for employee dismissal. Similarly, indirect performance feedback can reduce the confrontational nature of criticism. These strategies are consistent with negative-politeness concerns because they reduce the force of an imposition or threat. At the same time, they may contribute to positive politeness by demonstrating sensitivity toward the hearer's feelings and social self-image.

The English healthcare cases provide particularly clear evidence of this tension. Tayler and Ogden (2005) found that patients who received the direct term "heart failure" perceived the condition as more serious and reported greater anxiety and depression than patients who received the preferred euphemistic description. The findings suggest that euphemism may function as a form of emotional protection. At the same time, the researchers note a tension between openness and protection: the euphemistic formulation may be more protective, whereas the direct medical term may provide greater diagnostic clarity. Euphemism therefore does not automatically constitute better communication; its pragmatic value depends on the communicative purpose and context.

The Chinese cases reveal a particularly strong connection between euphemism and the maintenance of interpersonal harmony. In daily social interaction, indirect expressions can allow speakers to discuss death, financial difficulties, illness, and other sensitive subjects without forcing the interlocutor to confront the unpleasant information in an excessively direct manner. From the perspective of Leech's (1983) politeness principles, such practices can be interpreted in terms of the tact maxim, sympathy maxim, and agreement maxim. Speakers minimize the social or emotional cost imposed on others while maximizing consideration and interpersonal

sensitivity.

This pattern is especially evident in healthcare communication. Discussions of death and terminal illness involve not only the patient but also family members and healthcare professionals. Pitt, Hendrickson, and Marmet (2022), discussing research on critical-care conversations, note that among hundreds of references to death in clinician-family meetings, the direct words associated with death were used relatively rarely. Instead, clinicians employed several types of euphemistic expressions, including survival framing, colloquial expressions, medical jargon, and pronouns without clear antecedents. The findings illustrate how euphemism can function as a strategy for managing the emotional and interpersonal difficulty of end-of-life communication.

The comparison also suggests that the pragmatic orientation of euphemism may vary according to the interpersonal relationship involved. In communication between relatively equal participants, euphemism can primarily serve to preserve mutual comfort and solidarity. In hierarchical communication, such as manager-employee or doctor-patient interaction, euphemism may additionally regulate the power relationship between the participants. A manager communicating workforce reduction or a doctor communicating an unfavorable prognosis possesses institutional authority, and the use of indirect language can reduce the perceived severity or confrontational force of that authority.

The findings therefore suggest that euphemism should not be understood simply as a linguistic form of politeness. It is better understood as a pragmatic resource that enables speakers to balance competing communicative goals. Speakers must simultaneously communicate information, protect face, maintain relationships, and avoid unnecessary emotional harm. The appropriate degree of euphemism therefore depends on the topic, the relationship between participants, and the consequences of the information being communicated.

Overall, the findings for RQ2 demonstrate that English and Chinese euphemisms share the pragmatic goal of mitigating face-threatening information, but the emphasis of mitigation differs across contexts. English cases frequently emphasize the protection of individual feelings, personal boundaries, and the reduction of direct imposition, whereas Chinese cases more frequently foreground interpersonal harmony, relational sensitivity, and the avoidance of overt social embarrassment. These tendencies are not absolute, but they provide a useful basis for examining the cultural dimensions of euphemistic choice.

### **4.3. Cultural Values and Euphemistic Practices**

The findings for RQ3 indicate that linguistic and pragmatic differences between English and Chinese euphemisms cannot be fully explained by linguistic structure alone. Cultural values influence what kinds of information are considered sensitive, how directly such information is expected to be communicated, and which

interpersonal consequences speakers attempt to avoid. In this respect, Hofstede's (1980) dimensions of individualism–collectivism and power distance provide a useful framework, although they should be treated as broad tendencies rather than deterministic explanations of individual behavior.

The dimension of individualism–collectivism is particularly relevant to the contrast between English and Chinese euphemistic practices. In highly individualistic cultural contexts, communication tends to place relatively greater emphasis on individual autonomy, personal preferences, and individual rights. This orientation may encourage speakers to frame euphemistic communication around the protection of individual face and personal boundaries. In the English cases examined in this study, euphemisms concerning illness, death, and workplace criticism frequently appear to reduce the direct impact of information on the individual hearer.

In the Chinese cases, by contrast, euphemistic communication often places greater emphasis on maintaining relational harmony. The speaker's concern is not necessarily limited to protecting the individual hearer; it may also involve preserving the relationship between participants and avoiding discomfort for the wider interpersonal group. This is particularly apparent in family-related discussions of death and illness. Indirect expressions can allow family members to acknowledge difficult information while maintaining emotional solidarity and avoiding an unnecessarily confrontational interaction.

Power distance provides a second important dimension. Workplace and healthcare interactions are often characterized by unequal institutional roles. Managers possess authority over employees, while doctors possess specialized knowledge and institutional authority in relation to patients. The analysis suggests that euphemism can function as a linguistic mechanism for negotiating these asymmetrical relationships.

Vickers (2002) demonstrates that euphemistic rhetoric can influence how organizational members interpret workplace changes and construct organizational reality. Thus, euphemism may not merely protect the hearer's feelings; it can also frame institutional decisions in ways that make them appear more neutral, necessary, or manageable.

The Chinese workplace cases similarly demonstrate the importance of hierarchical relationships. Expressions referring indirectly to workforce adjustment, performance problems, or changes in organizational roles can reduce the explicitness of criticism or negative information. Within a hierarchical relationship, such indirectness may help the speaker preserve the subordinate's face while simultaneously maintaining the authority associated with the speaker's institutional position. The use of euphemism can therefore serve both relational and hierarchical functions.

The healthcare context further demonstrates the interaction between cultural

values and power relations. In Chinese medical communication, the involvement of family members can be particularly important when discussing serious illness and end-of-life decisions. Consequently, the communication of sensitive medical information may involve not only the doctor–patient relationship but also a broader family relationship. This creates a communicative environment in which protecting emotional harmony may become an important consideration alongside the transmission of medical information.

However, the findings also indicate that cultural explanations should not be interpreted as fixed national characteristics. Chinese speakers do not invariably prefer indirectness, just as English speakers do not invariably prefer directness. Zhang and Tseng (2022), for example, demonstrate that healthcare communication in Chinese and English involves considerable variation and that communicative choices depend on context. Similarly, research on death communication among Chinese populations suggests that attitudes toward discussing death can vary across individuals and circumstances. Cultural values should therefore be understood as influencing communicative preferences rather than determining individual linguistic behavior.

Another important finding is that euphemism can serve purposes that extend beyond politeness. In some workplace contexts, euphemistic language may obscure responsibility or soften the perception of organizational harm. In this respect, euphemism may function simultaneously as a politeness strategy and as a rhetorical strategy. Vickers (2002) shows that euphemistic organizational discourse can affect employees' interpretation of organizational events, while research on medical euphemism similarly demonstrates that indirect language can influence how patients perceive the seriousness of an illness.

The findings for RQ3 therefore suggest that individualism–collectivism and power distance provide useful explanatory dimensions for understanding English–Chinese differences, but neither dimension is sufficient on its own. Euphemistic choices emerge from the interaction of cultural expectations, interpersonal relationships, institutional roles, communicative purposes, and the sensitivity of the topic. Cultural values provide the broader framework within which speakers evaluate what counts as appropriate directness, while the immediate communicative context determines how those values are realized in actual discourse.

## 5. Conclusion

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that English and Chinese euphemisms share a fundamental communicative purpose but differ in their linguistic realization, pragmatic emphasis, and cultural orientation. The comparison can therefore be understood as a progression from linguistic form to pragmatic function and finally to cultural interpretation.

At the linguistic level, both languages employ lexical substitution, metaphorical

expression, descriptive reformulation, and indirect reference. However, the selected cases suggest that English euphemisms frequently favor relatively transparent lexical alternatives and institutional reframing, whereas Chinese euphemisms more often depend on indirect reference, conventionalized expressions, and contextual interpretation. The distinction should not be regarded as absolute; rather, it represents a tendency observed across the cases examined in this study.

At the pragmatic level, euphemisms in both languages function as mechanisms for mitigating face-threatening acts. They allow speakers to communicate unpleasant or sensitive information while reducing emotional discomfort and interpersonal confrontation. Nevertheless, the analysis suggests a difference in emphasis. English euphemistic communication tends to foreground individual face, personal boundaries, and the reduction of direct imposition, whereas Chinese euphemistic communication tends to place relatively greater emphasis on relational harmony, emotional protection, and the preservation of social relationships.

At the cultural level, the differences can be interpreted through the interaction of individualism–collectivism and power distance. Individualistic orientations help explain the prominence of individual face and personal autonomy in some English communication contexts, whereas collectivist orientations provide one possible explanation for the stronger emphasis on interpersonal harmony found in some Chinese cases. Power distance is particularly relevant to workplace and healthcare communication because both settings involve institutional hierarchies. Euphemism can soften the linguistic expression of authority while preserving the underlying institutional relationship.

The comparison also reveals that euphemism has an inherently ambivalent character. On the one hand, it can facilitate considerate communication by reducing emotional distress, protecting face, and maintaining interpersonal harmony. On the other hand, euphemism can obscure unpleasant realities and reduce communicative transparency. The workplace examples demonstrate how organizational euphemisms may reframe negative events such as workforce reduction, while the healthcare examples demonstrate the tension between emotional protection and accurate understanding. Thus, euphemism should not be evaluated as inherently positive or negative; its communicative effect depends on how, where, and why it is used.

The three interpersonal contexts further demonstrate that euphemistic strategies are sensitive to communicative goals. In daily social interaction, euphemism primarily functions to maintain interpersonal comfort and avoid embarrassment. In workplace communication, it additionally serves to manage institutional power, professional relationships, and potentially threatening organizational information. In healthcare communication, euphemism is closely associated with emotional protection, uncertainty, prognosis, and the communication of illness or death. The same general linguistic mechanism can therefore serve different pragmatic

functions depending on the communicative context.

Overall, the findings provide a hierarchical answer to the three research questions. RQ1 is addressed by demonstrating that English and Chinese employ overlapping but differently preferred linguistic realization strategies. RQ2 is addressed by showing that these strategies function as pragmatic resources for face management, interpersonal harmony, and mitigation of potentially threatening information. RQ3 is addressed by demonstrating that cultural values, particularly individualism–collectivism and power distance, provide a broader framework for understanding why similar communicative needs may be realized differently in English and Chinese.

The findings consequently support the view that euphemism is not merely a matter of replacing one word with another. It is a complex communicative practice shaped by linguistic choice, interpersonal relationships, institutional structures, and cultural expectations. The contrast between English and Chinese therefore illustrates how the same fundamental need—to communicate sensitive information without causing unnecessary interpersonal harm—can produce different linguistic and pragmatic patterns across cultures.

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