

The Euphemism Comparison Between English and Chinese

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Abstract. There are many lexical studies on euphemisms and general studies, and there is currently a lack of research on euphemisms in context. There is a lack of relevant articles based on euphemisms for chronological studies. This article examines English euphemisms through chronological comparisons and focuses on the influence of different cultures of different generations on euphemisms. The article explains the fundamental logic of the change and development of euphemisms. The culture of Western countries emphasizes personality development, while Chinese culture emphasizes restraint. Under the influence of Western cultures, Western euphemisms are relatively simple and mostly used to express politeness. It is relatively complex and emphasizes the human understanding that Chinese culture influences Chinese euphemisms. Along with the Europeanization of Chinese, Chinese euphemisms have also been influenced to some extent by English euphemisms. However, as time passed, Chinese and English euphemisms developed in a more concise direction, but both languages retained the polite function of euphemisms. Euphemisms are meant to show politeness and avoid conflict. Therefore, it is important to use the right euphemisms in intercultural communication and inter-age communication.

1 Introduction

The phenomenon of euphemisms has always attracted the attention of linguists. Language users must adhere to a few fundamental rules known as pragmatic principles to enable smooth communication [1]. The proper use of euphemisms can ensure the cooperation rules of pragmatic principles. Hence, euphemisms are not only a linguistic phenomenon, but also a socio-cultural phenomenon involving all aspects of social life. Influenced by different cultures, histories, and philosophies, there are certain similarities between Chinese and English euphemisms, but there are also obvious differences [2].

There is a lot of research on euphemisms in linguistics, involving pragmatics, lexicology, cognition, language psychology, etc. Most of these studies focused on the study of euphemistic vocabulary. The euphemistic vocabulary is extremely flexible and continually influenced by outside forces [3]. Research on taboo words has basically explored the development context of taboo words and the similarity of different languages. In addition to the study of euphemisms and taboo words, there are also euphemistic articles with general overviews. Generalizing studies of euphemisms generally agree that euphemisms have the following functions.

1. Be decent: Reduce hurtful words and sensitive words such as “death” in conversation [3-5].

2. Cooperation: Minimize disagreements during the conversation and reach an agreement with the other party [3-5].

3. Praise: Try to output content that is beneficial to others in conversation and reduce derogatory content to others [3-5].

Those studies just focus on the macro perspective of euphemism, but did not provide an in-depth analysis of culture’s impact on euphemisms. During the discussion, those articles chose more words as examples. However, there is little research on euphemisms sentences, and there is a lack of studies comparing euphemisms over time.

This article will focus on the comparative study of euphemisms through sentences. The comparison in this article will be compared through time series to explore the development law of euphemistic sentences. The main sources of the sentences are literary works, films and television works in the context of the era. The authenticity of the corpus is guaranteed to the greatest extent.

This article will contrast two euphemisms in Chinese and English. It focuses on the analysis of different cultural backgrounds at different times and the influence of cultural background on the development of euphemisms. It will explain the origin and reasons for the changes in euphemisms, as well as the essential reasons for the differences between Chinese and English euphemisms. It will first explain the root culture of Chinese and English euphemisms. Subsequently, it will be divided into four periods: Before the Foundation of Feudal Society, Feudal Society, the Period of the Industrial Revolution, and Modern Times for comparative analysis. The author believes that during these four periods, there has been a huge change in social concepts in both China and the Western world.

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From a primitive society to a feudal society, mankind gradually gained order and law. After the collapse of feudal society, people gradually began to pursue freedom and human rights. In modern society, people pay less attention to the order of society and pay more attention to saving time. Due to the certain Europeanization of Chinese in recent years, this article will also compare and analyze the influence of English on Chinese euphemisms. The author believes that in different cultural contexts, people use different euphemisms to express functions such as politeness, modesty, etc. Different ages lead to different cultural influences. Therefore, this article will help people choose the right euphemisms by analyzing the euphemisms of different eras. This will avoid impolite and inappropriate behavior in communication and cross-cultural communication, and improve the efficiency of communication. Moreover, this article will attempt to illustrate the development trend of euphemisms and will also try to provide some background material for the subsequent development of euphemisms.

2 Chinese Euphemism

Chinese euphemisms have a long history. That is mainly due to that people in China have attached great importance to “mian zi” (face). The problem of “mian zi” was caricatured by Xun Lu as “the principle of the Chinese spirit” and described by Yutang Lin as “the surface of Chinese psychology”. The essence of “mian zi” is society’s recognition of individual morality, ability, and achievements. China’s traditional ethics, from a certain point of view, are solving the problem of how to allocate resources, that is, solving the “mian zi” problem. For example, if a person has strong ability and high morality, and the master is willing to give him more resources. However, there is a person who is the master’s relative but has weak abilities and also wants more resources. It is necessary to take into account the “mian zi” of the master’s relative. That, formally, is called how to politely reject a person’s request by euphemism. Chinese Confucianism not only takes ability into account, but also takes people’s kinship, work relationships, and superior-subordinate relationships into the “mian zi” consideration. Confucianism also requires people to be polite in everything. This makes the classification of euphemisms more complex and more refined. For example, in Chinese, there are euphemisms that can only be used for superiors and euphemisms that can only be used for the elderly.

3 English Euphemism

English euphemisms are mainly derived from religion and the hierarchies of feudal society. Religion made people shy away from a class of words. The hierarchy of feudal society made people observe the principle of politeness. But during the Renaissance, humanism arose. At the heart of humanism is the importance of human dignity, the value and meaning of human life. The people gradually really realized the biblical story of God

giving man the power to dominate the world, so that people realize their nobility. People were no longer bound by the ascetic thinking of religion. People’s conscious consciousness from Roman times re-awaken and recognized the concept of “equality”. The use of euphemisms was gradually decreasing. People cared more about their personalities. The euphemism function gradually shifted to politeness. Moreover, the West does not attach importance to family relations. Their ethical and moral basis is the individual. The idea of “destroying the family bond” has been around since Plato’s time. Over generations, this idea has taken root, so Western euphemisms are hardly used for family elders.

4 Comparison and Analysis

4.1 Before the Foundation of Feudal Society

4.1.1 Chinese euphemisms

Due to the limitations of technology and science in the past, people believed in ghosts and God. They worshipped supernatural beings because they thought that many inexplicable phenomena were caused by God. The first euphemisms are names for God and ghosts [6].

In Ancient China, before the advent of Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, primitive religious beliefs also existed in China. As early as the Yangshao era, people believed that various natural phenomena were supported by various natural gods. For example, in China’s Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, there is a mural about 2,000-4,000 years old, and the mural depicts people worshipping the “frog god”. As they worshipped those primordial deities, they also gave them nice names. For example, they called the god of fire “Zhu Rong”. “Zhu” means good wishes for others, and “Rong” means things melt or harmony. The two characters together refer to ancient people’s good willingness to the god and their hope for living in harmony with fire. Ancient people also beautified the monsters as “immortal”, such as “snake immortal”, and “fox immortal”. Ancient Chinese people also fear of death and euphemistically called death “rest in peace”, or “go up to heaven”. They think whenever they directly speak out the word of death or monster, will bring them bad luck.

4.1.2 English euphemisms

In Ancient Greece, people feared the Fury. To comfort or to keep away the Fury, they euphemistically called the Fury “the Eumenides” or “Erinyes”, which means the revered ones. Besides the fear of the Fury, the ancient people also fear other gods. For example, the Hebrew uses “JHVH”, “HJWH”, “YHVH”, “YHWH” to call the god. They also feared death, and they thought one of the gods could govern death. So, they used many beautiful names to call the god of death, such as “The Great Whipper”, and “The Grim Reaper”, hoping to get the likes of the god of death, and keeping alive. They believe

the magic of words could ingratiate themselves with gods and gain their blessing.

4.2 Feudal Society

In the early feudal society, euphemisms in both Chinese and English were influenced by religion. The people of Europe embraced Christianity, so the monarch who gained secular power had to cooperate with the papacy to crown him and convince his subjects that the monarch's power came from God.

4.2.1 Chinese euphemisms

China's feudal society relied on Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. The rulers held propaganda for these three religions to educate the people, so that the people would study diligently and do more good deeds. Thus, the Chinese emperor would regularly worship the heavens to show that he followed the gods' instruction to rule the people, so the Chinese emperor was also called the "son of heaven".

Chinese euphemisms at this stage are mainly used to express politeness or self-preservation. This was also the result of the influence of Confucian "rite" culture. Confucianism emphasizes respect and inferiority, a clear hierarchy between elders and children, and strict adherence to ritual laws, such as people praising each other, respecting others, and using humble titles such as "Jun (describing others as an elegant and civilized person)" and "Nu Jia (women use this word to describe themselves as the poor and puny people)". Moreover, when choosing words, people should follow the requirements of elegance, such as they used "shui huo (fire and water)" to imply excretory behavior. The role of self-protection was mainly reflected in the euphemism of calling what they were afraid of, such as avoiding speaking out death directly, and distinguishing many different ways of calling death according to the different identities of people. The emperor's death was called "beng (this word usually describes the landslide, but in Ancient Times, people regard the death of the emperor as a big thing, so they used "beng")", and the death of civilians at the bottom of the status was called "sa shou (The natural reaction of people after death, letting go of their hands, also means that they no longer have to worry about the situation at home)".

In addition to word avoidance, it was also popular in Chinese to achieve the purpose of euphemistic communication through inner conversational meaning. This article uses *Yu Shi Ming Yan* as an example. *Yu Shi Ming Yan* was compiled by Menglong Feng in the Ming Dynasty on the basis of the Song Ming script and the onomatopoeic script, which comprehensively reflects the life outlook and thoughts and emotions of the citizens. It truly reflects the use of euphemisms in the Song, Yuan, and Ming dynasties, and is a reliable document for us to understand and study euphemisms during this period [7].

Here are some examples.

(1) *Taishou (the satrap of a county in Ancient China) said: You are still a Yue Ji (A kind of people who*

is proficient in playing instruments and have certain restrictions on personal freedom [8]. They are specially played for dignitaries.) now, and you can become a Xian Jun (Women who were rewarded by the emperor were usually married to high-ranking officials. Here it is implied that the woman married him.) tomorrow, how can you repay my kindness [8]?

The woman replied, "You have saved me from plight, and your kindness to me is so great that I can only ask heaven that your descendants will remain rich forever. [8]"

Here Taishou uses the personal pronoun "Xian Jun" to subtly express his bad intentions for this woman. The woman was forced by the power of Taishou and could not directly express refusal, so she rejected Taishou in a way that avoided the main point of the question, protecting Taishou's dignity and protecting herself [7].

(2) *Yanzi (an ambassador to visit another country) saw a hole in the lower part of the wall, and he wanted to get into it through this hole, and his entourage hurriedly stopped him and said: "They think that you are short, so they deliberately use this hole to insult you, why do you fall for their scheme? [9]"*

Yanzi said, "How can you know [9]? I've heard that people have doors and dogs have dog holes [9]. When the ambassador visits the nation of people, he enters through the door of man; when the ambassador visits the nation of the dogs, he enters through the dog hole. It's fair. [9]"

In the face of the dissuasion of the entourage, Yanzi did not answer positively. Instead, it states the relationship between the dog hole and the human door, which is used as an indirect expression of dissatisfaction with the country's hospitality.

4.2.2 English euphemisms

English euphemisms also developed considerably during this period. People lived through the period of Anglo-Saxon culture (Old English), during which non-euphemisms were very numerous, and people often spoke bluntly. As religion gradually penetrated into people's lives, many Puritans gradually appeared. The Puritans, dissatisfied with the vulgar language of the Bible, adapted it into a genteel version. Hence, the Bible uses a number of different euphemisms. Biblical euphemisms were an important source of euphemisms in English [1, 10]. In the bible, "coffin" is called "casket", "corpse" is called "earthly remains", and "funeral" is called "memorial service" [6]. The *Ten Commandments of Bible* even prescribed, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that takes his name in vain" [6].

In the 17th century, the development of euphemism was largely charged by politics. King James I of England signed a statute imposing a £12 fine for any act of profanity. Religious and political criticism is severely restricted. At the time, euphemisms about politics grew exponentially, at one point surpassing metaphorical words about death. In the 18th century, there was a greater emphasis on modesty and elegance, and

euphemisms prevailed, not only vulgar words had euphemisms, but also some neutral words derived their own euphemisms, for example, “fish” is called “finny tribe”, “scissors” is called “little engine”. People’s pursuit of euphemisms was also reflected in literature. For example, in Shakespeare’s *Othello*:

I’m among those who have come to inform you, sir, that your daughter and the Moor are currently creating a beast with two backs.

Speaking to Desdemona’s father, Brabantio, Iago describes her union with Othello as “creating the beast with two backs”. Iago uses euphemisms to cover up the reality since she knows her father won’t approve [11]. Iago’s use of euphemism conveys a sincerity that does not accurately reflect his genuine objectives, which is made slightly comical by the fact that he is trying to kill Othello [11].

4.3 The Period of the Industrial Revolution

4.3.1 Chinese euphemisms

At this time, China was still in the stage of feudal society, and with the development of feudal society and politics, the degree of euphemisms continued to deepen. There has been an accusation called “Wen zi yu” in all Chinese dynasties. This crime was given to the literati whose verses had implicit political content. For example, the poet Zhizhang He used the phrase “I wonder who cut the willow’s leaves? The February wind cuts the willow leaves like scissors” to describe spring. The emperor thought that the poem was alluding to his own political reforms, so Zhizhang He was convicted. Therefore, influenced by “wen zi yu”, the euphemisms of politics multiplied, and some words or poems that wrote about natural landscapes implied political events. This euphemism for politics had influenced other areas of social life. People use euphemisms frequently, which has become a fashion. This article takes *Dream of Red Mansions* as an example.

Dream of Red Mansions was written in the Qianlong era in the mid-eighteenth century, when China already had some germs of capitalist production relations, but it was still a feudal society. The novel describes the rise and fall of large families. The novel contains many euphemisms, which can fully reflect the language habits in society at that time.

Euphemisms continued to be used during this period and deepened their evasive function. In addition, euphemisms covered up ugliness, buffering direct conflict and embarrassment in the conversation. Such euphemisms often involved issues of marriage ethics, politics, military, diplomacy, etc. In *Dream of the Red Mansion*, this disguising function is mainly reflected in marriage and ethics:

Every day they steal chickens and play with dogs (describe the people who have nothing to do), “pa hui”, and raise their husband’s brothers [12].

“Pa hui” refers to the fornication between the father-in-law and the daughter-in-law. “Pa” means climbing, and “hui” means ashes. Climbing on ashes will make

people’s knees dirty. In Chinese, “knees” is homonymous with “daughter-in-law”. Therefore, “pa hui” is used to cover up this ugly incident between the father-in-law and daughter-in-law.

In Chinese culture, women’s language requirements are stricter than men’s, so women speak more elegantly. Therefore, women use euphemisms more frequently to avoid cheesy. For example, they used “changing clothes” to implied go to the bathroom.

Moreover, according to the traditional Chinese hierarchy, it was necessary to show one’s respect for elders, superiors, brothers, etc. This is important in the *Dream of the Red Mansion*, because the protagonist’s family is a very wealthy and powerful family, and the requirements for this politeness are also very high. Euphemisms to indicate politeness are also used frequently. In this story, people use “chun qiu (spring and autumn)” to imply one is old.

4.3.2 English euphemisms

After the Industrial Revolution, the aristocratic social system of the Western world, to a certain extent, was affected. But the aristocracy remained, and even deepened the use of euphemisms. They emphasized their decency and nobility, and paid attention to moral reputation. This article uses “*Downton Abbey*” as an example.

The play tells the story of a fictional British upper-class family, the Grantham family, in a fictional manor in Yorkshire – “*Downton Abbey*” at the beginning of the 20th century, and the problems of the outbreak of war at that time caused various contradictions, presenting the life of British high society at that time. The characters in the play, whether nobles or servants, have relatively pure accents, authentic expressions, and their own characteristics, and at the same time, a large number of British euphemisms are used in the play, which provides rich material to this article [13].

Euphemisms at this time can clearly reflect a person’s identity and status. People also adjust their way of speaking according to their status and identity and that of their interlocutors. For example:

LADY GRANTHAM: Where is Robert? He cannot have been drinking port since we left, he’d be under the table by now.

MR. BATES: Because you know no different. Until a couple of years ago, I was a drunkard... and I was imprisoned as a thief.

The word “drunk” is mentioned in the characters’ dialogues, but the expressions of the two people are different. Lady Grantham was an aristocratic woman from high society, so she was very careful about her speech and manners. When she wanted to express the word “drunk”, she adopted a more roundabout expression, using the euphemism “he’d be under the table” instead of “he is drunk”, reflecting her noble status in words. Mr. Bates himself comes from the underclass, so he uses a direct expression when he expresses the word “drunk”.

At this time, the use of euphemisms has become a hypocritical moral fashion, and everything needed to be avoided. Here is an example.

CARSON: Oh, Dr. Clarkson. Do you have a minute?

DR CLARKSON: Er...one minute. Do you mind if we...

CARSON: Only I know Mrs. Hughes is suffering from a condition.

This is a conversation between Downton Estate Grand Butler Carson and Dr. Clarkson. Hughes was the maid's foreman, and Carson and Hughes had worked together at Downton Abbey for many years and had a deep friendship. When Mrs. Hughes became ill, Carson wanted to say "She is ill" to the doctor, but in the context of the time, he did not want to refer directly to the disease, but used the euphemism "suffering from a condition" to express himself [14].

4.4 Modern Times

In modern times, there have been great changes in Chinese and English euphemisms.

4.4.1 Chinese euphemisms

Since the New Culture Movement in 1915, China has gradually changed its Chinese from ancient to vernacular. People's expressions have also changed from being filled with euphemisms to more straightforward and direct ways. This change is more evident in people born in different generations. People born before the millennium generally use more euphemisms. For example, they still do not say "death" directly, and still refer to death in an ancient way. But people born after the millennium can directly say death, which is more objective and direct. The younger generation (people younger than 25 years old) no longer dodge the word "death". On the Internet, they use "aaaa, I'm dying" to express their love for handsome guys and beauties; "laugh to die" to describe the thing very funny. The younger generation no longer shies away from their pursuit of money. For example, they can directly use the phrase "rich feel free to do anything". With the demise of feudalism, people's concept of hierarchy gradually faded. In some cases, the younger generation will pay less attention to the use of appellations. For example, at home, they would give their parents nicknames similar to "big lazy pigs" or call them by their first names.

4.4.2 English euphemisms

English euphemism is more direct and concise. For example, in the U.S., if they use "a pause + yes" to answer a question, and this actually means no. In everyday life, the use of euphemisms becomes a manifestation of personality. The euphemisms people use often highlight a person's personality and attitude to events. At 22 minutes 47 seconds of the movie "Forrest Gump", Forrest Gump enters the school and finds a crowd gathered at the school gate, asking Earl what

happened, and Earl replied that "Coons (bear cub)" wants to enter the school, apparently not really raccoon wants to enter the school, but the young man's representative of the black youth. However, in American society at that time, "Negro" was an extremely contemptuous and impudent title, meaning "black men", but Earl did not use the respectable "black men" nor "Negroes", but seemed to be cynical and careless answers, ingeniously using "Coons", showing full personality without appearing to lower his own qualities in front of white Forrest Gump [15]. They still retained basic respect, but the euphemisms are not used as frequently as in feudal times. People who do not believe in religion do not use euphemisms to refer to god.

5 Cultural Background

Chinese culture is deeply influenced by Taoism and Buddhism. In the two thoughts, they emphasize the importance of perception. After the widespread of the two religions, it has deeply influenced the literature and the way of people's speaking. Therefore, they always illustrate things in a blur and speciosity way. It requires people to have the ability to understand. A guest was asking the host how much would be appropriate to invest in a project, and the host did not speak. The host was pouring tea for the guests at that time, and the way of pouring tea for others was the ordinary way, but the way of pouring tea for this guest was the way of "Han Xin dian bing". "Han Xin dian bing" is an idiom in Chinese. This word often appears with "duo duo yi shan", which means the more the better. The guest could understand the meaning of this action. By the way of placing the teacup and the way of pouring the tea, the host can also express a variety of meanings to the guest, such as driving away the guest. Chinese calligraphy is also an implicit expression. Through a person's handwriting, people can see the character of that person. In calligraphy, people can choose to hide the tip of the last stroke or not, through which can find out the personality of the people.

This article takes the calligraphy of Emperor Huizong as an example. His calligraphy is known as "shou jin ti". In this kind of calligraphy, every tip of the stroke is not hidden. It can be seen that he was sharp and very confident in himself. He didn't care much about other people's feelings, so he didn't hide his tip. According to the history records, he was exactly a person like that. He was very confident in his calligraphy. He did not care about the feelings of citizens, and ignored managing the country. Under the influence of this implicit Chinese expression, Chinese euphemisms are more subtle.

English thinking mode is derived from the Anglo-European cultural model, which fundamentally is the Platonic-Aristotelian thinking way. Westerners always use syllogism and a deductive approach, and usually illustrate things in a straightforward way. For example, they will straightly point out the semantic relationship in the sentences by using specific conjunctions. Moreover, the West pursues personal and spiritual independence

even more. They are also more focus on themselves. For example, if one is praised by others in China, he needs to deny the compliment as a sign of courtesy, but not in the English context. Moreover, since most English-speaking countries are Christianity or Catholicism, the concept of equality of all men is emphasized in both religions. Thus, their personal awareness is stronger. For example, they will call their relatives directly by their name instead of the title of the relative.

Influenced by the different cultures, English euphemisms focus more on politeness, while Chinese euphemisms focus more on implicit expressions. For example, according to this article, English euphemism rarely has the function of implicit expressions. However, the Chinese, from the feudal society, has various euphemisms under the communication context, while the English didn't.

6 Conclusion

Euphemisms are a normal phenomenon in social life. Each language euphemism has its own special course and way of evolution. By comparing the development of euphemisms in Chinese and English over time, this article shows that the development of euphemisms is influenced by social customs and policies. Since primitive epochs in most countries throughout history were influenced by primitive religions, the author speculates that euphemisms in each country have words related to religion. The later development of euphemisms is determined by the different ethos of different times in different countries.

The euphemisms in Chinese are also influenced, to some extent, by English euphemisms (titles for family members). The author regards the English euphemism's impact on Chinese as related to the more communicative countries. Nowadays, different cultures influence and contain each other. The author believes that modern people are civilized and time-crunch, and prefer to express their ideas intuitively. In today's fast-paced development, excessive use of euphemisms can sometimes lead to unnecessary misunderstandings. Although this undermines the integrity of the culture to some extent, it is also a new fashion. Therefore, euphemisms are getting simpler.

According to the development of euphemisms chronologically, it can see that euphemisms are becoming simpler and simpler. However, the polite function of euphemisms is not omitted in either language. Various cultures still value social courtesy. Therefore, when communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds, attention should be paid to politeness. Also, it's best to choose the right euphemisms depending on the age and cultural background of the communicator.

This study fills the gap between euphemisms and bilingual comparisons over time. Through time, people can seek the commonality of the origin and evolution of euphemisms, and deduce the future development trend of euphemisms. However, the study only compares the two languages, and the exploration law has certain limitations, and future research should show more

language euphemisms for horizontal comparison, and explore the more general euphemisms development rules.

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