

# Euphemism in Modern American English

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Euphemism, as the linguistic and cultural phenomenon, is a lubricant in linguistic communication used in different aspects of social lives. With the rapid development of science and progress of human civilization, euphemism, as one of the most important components in English language, has the tendency of multiplying. This paper, based on the development of euphemism in modern American English, sums up the basic features of euphemism in modern American English and analyzes its formation and application in modern American society and culture with the objective of improving learners' communication ability in the context of cross cultural communication.

*Keywords:* euphemism, modern American English, formation, features, application

## Introduction

According to *Oxford English Dictionary* (2011), euphemism is a mild or indirect word or expression substituted for one considered to be too harsh or blunt when referring to something unpleasant. *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (2011) puts it this way: It is the act or an example of substituting a mild, indirect, or vague term for one considered harsh, blunt, or offensive. Euphemism with communicative function of evasiveness, politeness, and concealing, plays dual parts in everyday social lives. On the one hand, it puts an end to some embarrassing and obscene situations and displays the speaker's cultivation, serving as the lubricant of social development. On the other hand, overuse of it may conceal true facts and lead to confusion, for example, political cosmetic words. Euphemism helps writers to convey those ideas which have become a social taboo and are too embarrassing to mention directly. Politicians skillfully choose appropriate words to refer to and discuss a subject indirectly. Modern English euphemism relates to all aspects of personal as well as social lives ranging from political and economic life to everyday childbirth, death, disease, aging, marriage, and funeral. Since euphemisms are established social speaking and behaving norms, ways of thinking as well as outlook of value, it is essential to study their features and application.

## Features of Euphemism

### Nationalism

Due to different natural and social environment, different nationalities and nations differ in terms of ways of life, customs and habits as well as outlook of values leading to disparity in euphemism. A case in point is American national baseball whose events are a must watch for all the people. Therefore, countless euphemisms concerning baseball come into being: hitting a home run (having sex for the first date), batting both ways (bisexual love), and batting for the other team (homosexual love).

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### **Regionalism**

Different regions produce different historical cultures and customs as are reflected by different languages. For example, turkey is native to America and a favorite of American people. Turkey is an indispensable part of Christmas and Thanksgiving dinner. Therefore, euphemism related to turkey appears in American English. "Cold turkey" has the meaning of quitting smoke or alcohol suddenly while "talk turkey" conveys the meaning of speaking frankly or talking business. Turkey farm implies the kind of useless people from government organization or private enterprise.

### **Semantic Variations**

Disparity in status, identity, age, education degree, and sex may result in different expressions regardless of social contexts. For example, "going to the men's" or "ladies'" may be replaced by "powdering one's nose" or "freshing up" by women while men usually say "go to the toilet, to relieve myself, answer nature's call, nature is urgent". But for children, it is usually "go to the pot". Generally speaking, women have a higher frequency of using euphemism because they are more restricted by social norms than men; upper class tend to use more euphemism with the aim of displaying their nobility and elegance.

### **Time Variations**

Language keeps changing due to social needs and development. As a result, new words pop up while old ones gradually disappear. This is the case with euphemism too. Words like "dismissed, fired, early retired, laid off, furloughed, given the pink slip, downsized, right sized, capsized, bright sized, smart sized" have been used in time sequence to replace "out of work". Being pregnant has been taken place of in different time periods by "cancel all one's social engagement in an interesting condition, in a delicate condition, knit little boo ties, in a family way, be expecting, bun in the oven, knocked up, baby bump, gestating, with child, baby mama, eating for two, on the nest, preppers, a pea in the pod, lady in waiting, the bump watch, a visit from the stork, blossoming, under construction, baby on board" to hide pregnancy or to refer to a pregnancy in a funny way.

### **Ambiguity**

Ambiguous languages in euphemism are used to take the place of accurate ones to enlarge their meanings. This kind of ambiguity can conceal the cruelty of war, mishaps of disasters, diseases. In Iraqi War, American government named the war as "Iraqi Freedom" and it is "for justice and peace". "Shock and wave" is used to its 24 hour large scale bombing in Iraq by its air force. The Bush Administration even created the word "regime change" and "decapitation strike" to conceal its intention of military attack on Iraqi government and its action to punish Saddam Hossein.

## **Application of Euphemism**

Euphemism exists in all aspects of American English in great numbers and is categorized into eight types.

### **Death Aging and Disease**

The English language includes numerous euphemisms concerning death. People who died are referred to as "passed away", "passed", or "departed". Deceased is also a euphemism for dead, and is said to "have gone to a better place". Since death is such an inevitable and fearful result people hate to talk about, thus a multitude of euphemisms appear. Someone who has died is said to "have passed on, checked out, cashed in their chips, bit the big one, kicked the bucket, keeled over, bit the dust, popped their clogs, pegged it, carked it, was snuffed out, turned their toes up, hopped the twig, bought the farm, got zapped, written their epitaph, fallen off their

perch, croaked, given up the ghost, gone south, gone west, gone to California”.

Since aging in American English means nagging, dependence, poorer health, and rigid mindset people create a variety of alternative words to avoid the word itself. For example, “senior citizen, getting on in years, second childhood, third age, sunset years, elderly people, past one’s prime, the longer living, golden ager, the seasoned”.

Although disease is a natural process in human life cancer and aids stand for death which people try every means to avoid mentioning. They will replace them with euphemism even if they have to mention them. For example, acquired immune deficiency syndrome is shortened as “AIDs”, stroke as “accident”, influenza as “the flu”, and cancer as the “Big C”.

### **Marriage and Pregnancy**

With the great changes in society since the 60s of 20th century, women’s social position got raised and the value concept differed greatly from the past. The implementation of no-fault divorce beginning in 1969 in California and available in all states now made divorce easy. No-fault divorce is made on the grounds of “irreconcilable differences, irretrievable breakdown of marriage, incompatibility” or after a separation period, etc.. Divorce is renamed as “renovate, unwedding, matchruptcy”.

Euphemism for the act of getting married is to “tie the knot”. If a couple has been married for a while, a husband may jokingly refer to a wife as “the old ball and chain”, meaning that they are chained to each other. A spouse may also refer to the other as “my better half” or “significant other”. Living together with no wedding is gilded as “common law marriage, trial marriage, living together apart and the couple refer to each other as companion, paramour, partner”, or “cohabitee”.

Euphemisms for birth control devices exist in great numbers. For example, condoms are known as “rubbers, sheaths, love gloves, diving suits, raincoats, French letters, Jimmy Caps, Johnnies”, etc. to avoid embarrassment or discomfort. Euphemisms are also common in reference to pregnancy. The terms “in the club, in a family way, eating for two, swallow a watermelon seed, wear the apron high” are all used to refer to pregnancy.

### **Military**

Euphemisms are prevalent in military language in order to hide the unpleasant nature of the work. Armies talk of “neutralizing” or “clearing enemy combatants” to mean killing them. “Clearing” is used to refer to killing enemy in order to reach objectives, “collateral damage” is used in regards to unintentional or incidental damage to non-combatant property and “involvement” is used to replace aggression in order to sound more pleasant. Many countries call their military administration “Department of Defense” rather than War. In the 1991 Gulf War, American government adopted a series of euphemisms like “air operation, air support, air interdiction, ground operation, and preemptive defense” to replace ground attack or air bombing. “Special rendition” can be used to refer to kidnapping and “refined interrogation techniques, enhanced interrogation techniques” or “alternative set of procedures” are employed to refer to the U.S. government’s program of systematic torture of detainees by the central Intelligence Agency. A soldier died in the battle would be euphemized as “blown across the creek, bite the dust, done his bit”.

### **Disability and Handicap**

In the United States, spastic or spaz was a synonym for physical and mental clumsiness and is very often used deprecatingly. Idiot, imbecile, and moron had negative connotations too. So the phrase “mentally retarded”

was pressed into usage to replace them. This was soon considered pejorative and became commonly used as an insult. Nowadays, terms such as “mentally challenged, learning difficulties, and special needs” are used to replace the term retarded. Terms for people with physical handicaps were adopted in progression: lame/crippled → handicapped → disabled → physically challenged → differently abled → people with disabilities. The blind is tagged as “visually challenged”, stupid as “mentally challenged”, weak in language as “verbally challenged”, old as “chronically challenged”, poor as “financially challenged”, not beautiful as “aesthetically challenged”, short as “vertically challenged”, poorly dressed as “sartorially challenged”, not good at computer as “electronically challenged”, bad moral as “ethically challenged”, etc.. Similarly, the word “fat” has many polite versions such as “big, heavy, curvy, fluffy, zaftig, plus sized, thick-boned, full-figured, heavy set, extra large, plump”, and “Rubenesque”.

### **Profanity**

Profane words and expressions in the English language are usually taken from such areas as religion, excretion, and sex. Racism and sexism have an increasing influence on profanities. Although profanities have been around for centuries, some of their use in public and by the media have slowly become socially acceptable. One influence on the current tolerance of such language may be their appearance on prime-time television. The word “damn” and most other religious profanity in the English language have long lost its shock value. Euphemisms for male masturbation such as “spanking the monkey” or “choke the chicken” are used often among some people to avoid embarrassment in public. Excretory profanity such as piss and shit in some cases may be acceptable among friends but had been unacceptable in formal occasions or in public. To urinate is replaced by “to take a piss, take a leak, to empty, to take a slash, relieve myself, take whiz” and “number one”. Most sexual terms and expressions, even technical ones have undergone radical rehabilitation. Words for physiological phenomenon and sexual organs are considered rude and obscene so replaced by refined or implicit terms. “Posterior” is used to refer to buttocks, “charms” to breast, and “private parts” to vagina or penis. Sexual intercourse are euphemized as “do it, make love, go to bed with somebody, sleep with someone, get laid, screw, go all the way, score, the birds and bees, love glove”.

### **Profession**

The division of profession may make some people feel low in social position, so they need euphemisms to rename their jobs and gain respect from others or avoid embarrassment. Garbage collector is replaced by “sanitation engineer”, automobile mechanic by “automobile engineer”, secretary by “administrative assistant”, maid by “domestic engineer”, butcher by “technologist”, prison custodian by “correctional facility”, window cleaner by “transparent wall maintenance officer”, rat catcher by “rodent officer”, grave digger by “cemetery operative”, sex worker by “comfort woman, call girl” and “business girl”, janitor by “security officer”, housewife by “domestic manager”, floor walker by “aisle manager”, and stripper by “exotic dancer”. Other examples such as “being fired” or “out of work” can be gilded as: laid off, discharged, dismissed, made redundant, furloughed, separated, given the pink slip, outplaced, riffed, bought out, released, unassigned, cut ties, uninstalled, separated, services no longer required, early retired, eased out, forced resignation, stepped down, position eliminated, given the package, released from the talent pool, declined to extend, assignment expired, helped her with exit, going in different directions, one-person layoff, managed out, career transition, career change opportunity, contract not renewed, end of trial period, involuntary separation, freed up for the future, relieved of duties, taking it for the team, and promoted to customer (retail workers).

### **Politics**

Political field is rich in euphemism, so euphemism in politics is called political euphemism. Political euphemisms are used for social problems such as poverty, unemployment, crime, racism, bankruptcy, and recession. In order to cover the problems of poverty and unemployment, the government kept creating euphemisms. The poor people are gilded as “the deprived, man of modest means, the less well off, the under privileged, economically disadvantaged”, and slum is replaced by “substandard housing, in an economically depressed neighborhood, culturally deprived environment”. Politicians in Arizona mention people running across the border as “illegal aliens”, unless they are employed to tend to the children or flower gardens of the native people, they are known as “undocumented workers”. “Temporary negative cash” is used to refer to the state of being broke. Bad, crappy debts are “non- or under-performing assets”. The 2008 financial crisis is named as “economic downturn” or “economic slowdown”. Poor and backward countries are replaced by “undeveloped countries, underdeveloped countries, developing countries, the third world countries, the fourth world”.

### **Education**

With the development of society and technology, euphemisms abound in education too. In general, these vague usages do not cause ambiguity or communication failure but are used just to avoid rudeness or bluntness. For example, a dumb student is called a “slow student” or “underachiever”; an idiot is replaced by “person with learning difficulties” and “special needs”. If a student tells lies, he will be said to “misspoke, bend the truth, tell a white lie, color the truth, be economical with the truth, dissemble, be unreliable”, etc.. If he cheats in the exam, cheating may be replaced by “peer homework, comparing answers, collaborating, harvesting answers”. A student below the average will be referred as “he can do better with help”. A child having no hobbies is called “not so versatile, a special child” or “exceptional child”. If a child stays in a gang, he may be said to “feel secure only in group situation”. A child who is domineering and arrogant is replaced by “having qualities of lead ship, but needs help in learning to use them democratically”.

## **Formation of Euphemism**

### **Phonetic Means**

This means using unstressing and phonetic distortion to create euphemism. Unstressing can easily reduce the unpleasant meaning of the things being spoken, thus achieving euphemistic effect. Phonetic distortion may include apocopation (homo for homosexual), reduplication (pee-pee for piss), initialing (VD for venereal disease), diminutive (heinie for buttocks), and blend word (gezunda for chamber pot meaning “goes under the bed”). Deliberately mispronouncing an offensive word may reduce its severity or embarrassment, for example, “darn” and “shoot”.

### **Semantic Means**

Several approaches are employed to create euphemism on the semantic level to avoid embarrassment or rudeness. It may be in the form of abbreviations, for example, B.O. is used to replace body odor. Foreign word like “faux” (fake) or “faux pas” (foolish error) may be used to replace an impolite expression. They may be abstractions, for example, “before I go” (before I die) and “foundation for girdle”. They may also be indirect expressions replacing direct ones which may sound offensive, for example, “rear-end”, “unmentionables”, etc.. Using longer words or phrases can also conceal unpleasant words, for example, “flatulence” for farting,

“perspiration” for sweat, “mentally challenged” for stupid, “social disease” for syphilis, “solid human waste” for feces, etc.. Using technical terms like “gluteus maximus” may reduce the rudeness exhibited by words. In real estate, when a property is difficult to sell, the seller will use euphemism to attract potential buyer. “Cozy house” is a euphemism for Claustrophobia. The phrase “this house needs some TLC” is a euphemism for “this place is a dump”.

### Grammatical Means

Indirectness is achieved through psychological distance by the usage of past tense such as subjunctive mood and modal auxiliaries. By delaying the speaker’s volition, the listener will feel it a thing of the past and will not feel embarrassed or unacceptable, thus reaching the goal of politeness and saving face. For example, “I wish I had such a mega house” (I want to have a mega house), “You might as well try Happy Farm” (Try Happy Farm).

Employing present continuous tense stresses the transiency of the action implying that the speaker’s volition is immature or transient, so it would be OK for the listener to refuse. For example, “I’m hoping to see the film with you” sounds more polite than “see this film with me soon”.

Other grammatical means include passive voice (“It is said that he is the meanest man in this community”), which emphasizes the objectivity of the things mentioned (Wouldn’t it be wiser if you buy the book online?) rather than the doers and tag questions to achieve euphemistic result.

### Conclusion

Linguistic indirectness has long been one of the components of language and pragmatic research with euphemism being the center of it. It would be a beneficial guide for the language learners to understand the culture and the psychologies of the target culture. In addition, by learning appropriate usage of words and phrases, learners can avoid being misunderstood in dealing with people from other cultures. Presently, more and more people pay attention to the research on euphemism. By studying euphemism, learners can not only enlarge their knowledge, but also grasp the social psychology of the user using euphemisms, and then understand and use it properly.

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