
EUPHEMISMS IN ENGLISH AND UZBEK: LINGUOCULTURAL AND PRAGMATIC ASPECTS

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Abstract

Euphemism is a linguistic universal rooted in the human need to speak about what a community considers dangerous, painful or improper. This paper compares euphemistic vocabulary in English and Uzbek from a linguocultural and pragmatic perspective. It identifies the principal thematic domains in which euphemisms cluster, describes the formal mechanisms of their creation, and analyses the functions they perform in communication. The comparison shows that the two languages employ largely the same formal devices, but differ in motivation: Uzbek euphemism is shaped predominantly by religious and ethical norms and by the hierarchy of respect, whereas English euphemism is increasingly institutional and socio-political in character. The paper argues that euphemism should be treated as a pragmatic strategy of face-saving rather than as a purely lexical phenomenon.

Keywords: euphemism, taboo, linguoculturology, pragmatics, politeness, face-saving, political correctness, national worldview, English language, Uzbek language.

The existence of euphemism in every known language testifies to a universal communicative need: certain referents cannot be named directly without social cost, and speakers therefore develop substitute expressions that permit reference while suppressing the unwanted associations of the direct name. Allan and Burridge define euphemism as an alternative to a dispreferred expression, used in order to avoid possible loss of face either for the speaker or for the addressee, and this definition situates the phenomenon firmly within pragmatics rather than within lexicology alone. The euphemistic substitute is not simply a polite synonym; it is a choice motivated by the



speaker's assessment of the situation, of the relationship between the participants and of the norms operating in a given culture. A comparison of English and Uzbek is instructive precisely because these two languages, typologically and culturally distant, resort to comparable formal means while being guided by markedly different cultural motivations.

The thematic distribution of euphemisms is broadly similar in both languages. The domain of death remains the most productive: English replaces the direct verb with pass away, depart, be no longer with us, or the nominal the departed, while Uzbek employs vafot etmoq, olamdan o'tmoq, boqiy dunyoga rihlat qilmoq and the formulaic bandalikni bajo keltirmoq. Illness, physiology and the body constitute a second cluster, realised in English through indisposed, not feeling oneself or under the weather, and in Uzbek through betob, mazasi yo'q, noxush. Poverty, unemployment, old age and physical limitation form the third group, where English has developed a rich institutional inventory including low-income, between jobs, senior citizen and differently abled. In Uzbek this group is represented by expressions such as yoshi ulug' and imkoniyati cheklangan, several of which have entered the language as calques of European models.

The formal mechanisms by which euphemisms are produced are largely shared. Metaphor is the most productive of them, allowing a distressing referent to be reinterpreted through a benign source domain, as when death is presented as a journey or as rest. Metonymy replaces the whole by a part or by an adjacent circumstance; generalisation substitutes a hyperonym of very broad meaning for a precise term; litotes and negation weaken an unpleasant characteristic instead of naming its opposite. Borrowing constitutes a further device, since a foreign word is perceived as more distant and therefore less offensive, a mechanism that operates in English through Latinate vocabulary and in Uzbek through Arabic and Persian religious lexis. Formal distortion, abbreviation and deliberate vagueness complete the inventory. What differs between the two languages is not the set of mechanisms but the relative weight assigned to each of them.

The linguocultural dimension reveals the essential asymmetry. In Uzbek, euphemism is inseparable from religious tradition and from the ethics of respect: expressions relating to death are saturated with Islamic formulas, and the obligation to avoid direct naming is reinforced by a hierarchical

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system of address in which age and social status determine the degree of indirectness required. The euphemism here functions as an instrument of deference and of moral propriety. In English, by contrast, the most dynamic segment of contemporary euphemistic vocabulary is generated by institutional and political discourse. Political correctness has produced an extensive layer of designations intended to protect social groups from stigmatising reference, while administrative and military language has produced a parallel layer whose purpose is to conceal rather than to protect. The motivations, therefore, diverge: religious and ethical in the Uzbek tradition, social and institutional in the English one.

From a pragmatic point of view, euphemism is best understood within the theory of politeness. Brown and Levinson describe communication as a continuous negotiation of face, and the euphemistic substitution is one of the standard strategies by which a face-threatening act is mitigated. Yet the same mechanism that protects the addressee may also be used to mislead. When an institution replaces a precise designation with a vague one in order to obscure responsibility, the euphemism ceases to be an act of politeness and becomes an instrument of manipulation. A further pragmatic consequence is the instability of euphemistic vocabulary: as a substitute becomes firmly associated with the taboo referent, it absorbs the negative connotations of the term it replaced and is itself replaced in turn, so that euphemistic series are renewed continuously in both languages.

Euphemism is properly understood only in opposition to dysphemism, its functional counterpart. Whereas the euphemistic substitute mitigates, the dysphemistic one intensifies, deliberately choosing the harshest available designation in order to offend, to express contempt or to provoke. The two devices operate on the same referential material and are governed by the same cultural taboos; a speaker who selects between them performs an evaluative act that positions both the referent and the addressee. This opposition has immediate consequences for translation. Since the euphemistic value of an expression is assigned by the receiving culture rather than by its literal content, a formally accurate rendering may destroy the effect entirely: an Uzbek religious formula for death translated literally into English produces an exotic image instead of a decorous statement, and an English institutional euphemism translated literally into Uzbek may sound

evasive where the original sounds neutral. Adequate translation therefore requires the selection of a functional equivalent occupying a comparable position in the euphemistic system of the target language.

In conclusion, the comparative analysis demonstrates that English and Uzbek euphemism coincide in their thematic organisation and in their formal repertoire but diverge in cultural motivation, the Uzbek system being oriented towards religious and hierarchical norms and the English system towards social and institutional ones. This divergence confirms that euphemism cannot be described adequately by lexical means alone: the same formal device acquires different values depending on the cultural context in which it operates. Consequently, euphemism should be studied as a pragmatic strategy realised by lexical means, and its adequate rendering in translation requires the reproduction of communicative intention rather than of formal structure.

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