On The Use of Euphemism with Politeness Principles and its Implications for College English Teaching

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Abstract. Euphemism, as a linguistic and cultural phenomenon, contributes greatly to people’s daily communication. The proper use of euphemism is helpful in avoiding harm and offending to others. Meanwhile, the use of euphemism, featured with the use of cultured and indirect language, always complies with politeness principle accordingly, which reveals certain humanistic spirits.

This paper mainly discusses how to use English euphemism from the perspective of Politeness Principle. Through analysis, the author pointed out that euphemism should be properly used in certain degree of politeness, and the use of direct and indirect method of applying euphemism in college English teaching can help achieve the successful communication and promotion of English teaching and learning.

Introduction of English Euphemism

The Definition of English Euphemism

The word “euphemism” in English comes from classical Greek. In classical Greek, “eu” means “well” or “sounding well”, “pheme” means ‘speech”. So the literal meaning of the whole word is “elegant and fair-sounding speech” [1].

Euphemism is a kind of common social phenomenon of language which exists in the majority of human’s languages. In the process of communication, based on the principle of politeness, people generally used the implicative, mild, elegant and tactful language instead of stiff, straightforward and coarse language. The form of language not only cover up the unpleasant and disgusting reality that people usually don’t want to contact, but also make those embarrassing things hidden in the outerwear of language, thus avoiding the conflicts and unhappiness. So the use of Euphemism is common and it is necessary for the learner of English to master its classification.

The Classification of English Euphemism

Positive Euphemism and Negative Euphemism

Positive euphemism can be called stylistic euphemism. It makes the low, bad and coarse language become good and elegant. For example, people use “mental hospital” for “madhouse”; in order to make people feel it normal [1]. Take some occupational titles for example, people often use “dining-room attendants” for “waiter or waitress”, “cleaning operative” for “road-sweeper or dustman”, “guest worker” for “foreigner labor”, “domestic engineer” for “housewife”, etc. Those words can elevate the status of the workers and make them not be discriminated against by people.
Negative euphemism, known as taboos, can be called traditional euphemism. People use taboos to avoid the ineffable matters, such as death, disease, sex, disabilities and so on. For example, there are large number of euphemism to replace the “death”, like “pass away”, “gone to heaven”, “to breath one’s last”, “expire”, “go to meet one’s Maker”, “to lay down one’s life”, “join the angles”, “to climb the golden staircase”, “to run one’s course”, “go over the range”, etc. From the point of gender differences, when a woman is pregnant, people will say “She is going to have a baby” or “She is big with young”, “She is nurturing a new life,” “She is one with another”.

**Conscious Euphemism and Unconscious Euphemism**

The unconscious euphemism refer to those euphemistic expressions which were created long time ago, and are employed by people unconsciously and nobody know their primary meanings. Under certain circumstances, people use “indisposition” for “disease”. Since the fourteenth century, people often use the word “cemetery” instead of the word “graveyard”. Those words were developed so long ago that few can remember their original motivations and original meanings.

Conscious euphemisms are broadly used in daily life. People are conscious of their primary meaning and this kind of euphemism produces a rhetoric effect of equivocation. That is to say, when people communicate with each other, speakers are conscious to say directly, thus making listeners understand their implied meanings. For example, at a party, when someone wants to go to the toilet, “I want to powder my nose” or “I want to make a phone call” are the better expressions in that case. Other people will understand their implied meaning---go to the washroom [2].

**Other Classifications of English Euphemism**

Euphemism can also be classified into those types: euphemism of gender, euphemism of demise, euphemism of profession, euphemism of illness, euphemism of politics, euphemism of warfare and so on. Those types are classified on the basis of the application of euphemism[2]. Besides, from the perspective of users, euphemism can be classified into those types: student euphemism, politician euphemism, criminal euphemism, teacher euphemism, etc. So euphemism can be divided into many different types according to different perspectives, thus making people understand deeper and thorough the characteristics of English euphemism and the relevant functions of English euphemism.

**An Analysis of English Euphemism based on Politeness Principle**

**Definition of Politeness**

Politeness is the expression of the speakers’ intention to mitigate face threats. In 1987, Penelope Brown and Steven Levinson firstly formulated politeness theory, they identified two kinds of politeness, 1) Negative politeness: Making a request less infringing, such as "If you don't mind..." or " If it isn't too much trouble..."; respects a person's right to act freely. There is a greater use of indirect speech acts; 2) Positive politeness: Seeks to establish a positive relationship between parties; respects a person's need to be liked and understood. Direct speech acts, swearing and flouting can be considered aspects of positive politeness [3].
Leech’s Politeness Principle

Leech proposed (1983) the Politeness Principle which is formulated in a general way from the following two aspects:

1) To minimize the expression of impolite beliefs;
2) To maximize the expression of polite beliefs.

The politeness principles encompass six maxims: Tact maxim, Generosity maxim, Approbation maxim, Modesty maxim, Agreement maxim and Sympathy maxim, which Geoff Leech has proposed as a way to explain how politeness operates in conversational exchanges.

Leech (1983) defines politeness as forms of people’s behavior that establish and maintain comity. That is the ability of participants in a social interaction to engage in interaction in an atmosphere of relative harmony [4].

The Politeness Principle put forward by Leech explains why people sometimes violated the Cooperative Principle and let people know how to create a harmonious relationship with other people [5]. In daily communication, people should observe the Politeness Principle, which help people get to know how to save others’ faces and make the hearer feel relaxed and pleasant. The aspects of observing Politeness principles are as follow:

**Comply with Tact Maxim**

Tact Maxim means to minimize the cost to others and maximize the benefit to others. For example, when we some people want to lend cars from you, they might say “Will you lend me your car?”, “Lend me your car!” and “You must lend me your car!”. Those impolite expressions will make the hearer think the speaker impolite and ill-bred. The result is that the hearer doesn’t want to lend the speaker the car. On the contrary, if the speaker says “Would it be possible for you to lend me your car?”, the hearer won’t think that the speaker orders him to lend him a car.

**Comply with Generosity Maxim**

Generosity Maxim means to minimize the benefit to self and maximize the cost to self. In other words, when the speaker uses euphemism, he uses the polite expressions to consider others’ feelings at a certain cost to himself. For example, when people are in trouble and they need help, some people say “Do you need my help?”. The expression will make the hearer feel embarrassed to say “Yes!”. But the speaker uses euphemism such as “What can I do for you?” and “Let me help you”, the hearer will think the speaker genuinely wants to help him and be willing to let the speaker give the help. The Euphemistic expressions contributes to leave a good impression on others and make people feel relaxed and comfortable.

**Comply with Approbation Maxim**

Approbation Maxim means to minimize dispraise of others; maximize praise of others. In other words, people should praise others instead of dispraise others in order not to hurt other people’s feeling. For example, when people see an old British woman, they use “senior citizen”, “second childhood” and “the longer living” to replace “old age” and “senility” in order not to hurt the woman’s feeling. Take the teaching for example, teachers call one stupid student “a slow learner” or “underachiever” to encourage the students not to give up. And in order to make students realize their own defaults and avoid hurting them, the teachers often use positive words or expressions, such as “You can do better work with help!”, “You would be better next time!” when a
student gives the wrong answer. It can reestablished self-confidence of the student in experiencing pleasant learning.

**Comply with Modesty Maxim**

Modesty Maxim means to minimize praise of self and maximize dispraise of self. For example, when one student praises another student for his full marks in exam and says “What a brilliant boy you are! You get full marks in the examination!” If another student uses euphemism, he might say “Thank you, I have a very good teacher”, “The exam questions are not that hard” or “Thank you, but I am not the only one in the class that gets full marks”. Through using those euphemistic expressions, the speaker will leave a modest impression on other people. On the contrary, if he says “Yes, I am”, the hearer will think he is an arrogant student.

**Comply with Agreement Maxim**

Agreement Maxim means to minimize disagreement between self and others and maximize agreement between self and others. In some cases, people have disagreement with other people on certain opinions. People choose to use euphemistic expressions to convey politely their disagreement or emphasize the agreement points in order to decrease the conflicts between them. For example, if one says “That dress she is wearing is beautiful, don’t you think so?” the polite answer could be “Yes, absolutely!” or “Yes, I couldn’t agree with you anymore!” If the speaker answers “I don’t think it’s beautiful at all”, the hearer will think the speaker isn’t an easy person to be with. The use of euphemistic expression can avoid disagreements and maximize the size of agreement, thus making the hearer feel comfortable and pleasant.

**Comply with Sympathy Maxim**

Sympathy Maxim means to minimize antipathy between self and others and maximize sympathy between self and others. For example, people use “slow of hearing” for “deaf”, “visually retarded” for “blind”, “color deficient” for “color blind” in order to show their sympathy to the disable. What’s more, people usually use “down one’s good luck”, “needy”, “on the bread line”, “hard up for money”, “less well off” and “badly off” to replace “poor” in order to show sympathy to the poor. Take another example, when a student says “I am sorry, I couldn’t work it out” and shows his sadness about something. The polite person will use euphemism such as “Don’t be sorry about that, the problem is difficult for most of students” to show his sympathy and make the hearer feel relaxed and relieved.

**Implications For College English Teaching**

**Direct Teaching Method**

**Teaching Classification of Euphemism.** As we have mentioned above, English euphemism can be divided into different types. Teachers should teach the students the classification of euphemism at the beginning to help the students get a general idea, which is the foundation for students to use euphemism successfully in different communicative situations.

**Teaching Euphemism with Reference to Chinese.** Chinese will definitely influence the learning process of a foreign language. The learner can learn the use of euphemism through Chinese first. Accordingly, when teaching English euphemism, teachers can mention the relevant Chinese counterparts to facilitate a better understanding. When teaching students, the teacher should make comparison of the
usage of euphemism between English and Chinese and figure out the difference, so
the students can have a good command of euphemism more easily.

Teaching Euphemism by Explaining Cultural Differences. Since language and
culture are closely related to each other. Learners should attach more importance to
culture when studying euphemism. So it is pretty important for the teachers to
consider culture aspects when teaching and using euphemism.

Practicing with Text. To get a good command of euphemism, the teacher should
collect and make full use of the euphemism used in the text, explain the usage and
functions in detail, and then guide the students to practice the proper use of
euphemism in communications [6]. The teacher could do as follow: 1) find out the
vague items in the text and classify them according to the pragmatic classification. 2)
discuss the pragmatic functions of the items in groups. 3) Remove all the vague items
in the text and see what effect will take without the use of the items. 4) Sum up of the
use of euphemistic expressions.

Indirect Teaching Method
Indirect teaching method means the teacher apply suitable euphemistic expressions in
his or her communication with students in class, which means the teacher should sets
good example of using euphemism tactfully for students.
Surely teachers can resort to euphemism when they intend to modify something
unpleasant by using mild or polite words or phrases, so as to promote mutual respect
and pleasant learning environment.

Using Euphemism for Questions Posing. The application of euphemistic
expressions can arouse students' interests and create a sense of trust in the teachers,
which helps the students feel at ease and relaxed in the classroom, which enables the
students to answer the questions willingly. Also, applying Euphemism to asking and
answering some questions, teachers could benefit from improving the interaction
between the teachers and students.

Using Euphemism for Comments on Students' Performance. Teachers to know
some skills of commenting on students' performance. To achieve this goal, teachers
may resort to euphemistic expression for help. The key lies in how to save the faces of
the students, and how to reduce their anxiety in learning English. Teachers should
courage the students; meanwhile they should indirectly tell the students that there is
much room for them to improve.

Using Euphemism for Marking Students' Mistakes. Teachers should be able to
correct students’ mistakes without offending them. Euphemistic expressions just meet
these needs. The indirect, polite, and mild way of euphemistic expressions can make
students be aware of their mistakes, meanwhile, it protects the students' face, which
leads to relaxing and harmonious teaching environment and it also facilitates the
achieving of certain teaching objectives.

Conclusion
Euphemism is helpful for people’s communication and creation of a harmonious
relationship with others. Nowadays, it is obviously that euphemism plays an
important role in people’s daily communication. By using euphemism in certain
occasions, people can avoid using direct expressions which do harm to other people
and even can save others’ faces or protect their self-esteem.

Euphemism is a manifestation of the Politeness Principle. Through analyzing
English euphemism under the Politeness Principle, while employing direct way and
indirect way of teaching euphemism, this paper implicates that it is feasible to apply the use of euphemism in College English teaching, which proves to be effective in achieving successful, harmonious communicative teaching and learning of English.

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