The Avoidance and Disguising Functions of English Euphemisms

---Examples from American Political Language

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Abstract: Euphemisms contain cultural connotations and socio-pragmatic functions of the language and are an indispensable part of language acquisition. Euphemisms are used in wide circumstances, their functions depend on different contexts. It always disguises the real meaning in order to achieve different purposes. It is quite significant to understand the real meanings of euphemisms so that L2 learners can become native speakers more effectively. Therefore, this paper is focused on the avoidance and disguising functions of English euphemisms---examples from American political language. First, this paper uses the case study, narrows the range of euphemisms to the political field, and selects relative readings such as political reports from leading newspapers and celebrity speeches. Then this paper applied specific methods: combined content analysis and discourse analysis together to handle the selected cases. This paper finds that there is a relationship between the frequency of euphemisms in specific political fields. Euphemisms are used more frequently in the political field.

Keywords: euphemisms, avoidance and disguising functions, American, political field

1. Introduction

Euphemism is a common language phenomenon and a reflection of cultural background [1]. Language is a practical tool used in communications between people, and language is changed depending on different language environments. Euphemism appears first because there are lots of taboos in English, such as reliefs, death, sex, and so on. But people can not avoid using these kinds of words all the time, so people develop euphemisms to cover the negative meanings. Since former scholars have researched, euphemisms have various functions. The usual euphemisms can be divided into two parts: traditional euphemisms and stylistic euphemisms. Stylistic euphemisms also can be called cosmetic words or foggy words.

In classes before, the professor has mentioned the difficulty of the euphemism for Second Language Learners to acquire. Because it is related to cultural background and it is hard to apply in real conversations. Professor also gave an example of him and his colleague, he had to express himself very politely as a favor. Therefore, it is really a meaningful topic to discover.

Euphemisms have wide functions. For instance, it can be used for beautification, politeness, avoidance, disguising, cooperation, and so on. On dozens of official occasions, euphemisms are used. Writers have found in the political field, politicians and relative reports show euphemisms very frequently. Writers collected different aspects of materials, political reports in leading newspapers, essays from former scholars, and speeches of celebrities. According to our reading and learning, the writer decided to arise this topic. Here are the Research Question:

(1) Whether there are potential relationships between the avoidance and disguising functions and euphemisms in the political field or not?

(2) How can people describe this relationship? Can people summarize it into a special theory?

2. Definition

2.1. Euphemisms

Euphemisms have two types, one is traditional euphemisms, the other is called stylistic euphemisms. Traditional euphemisms are used to cover sensitive words such as death, sex, relief, and so on. Stylistic euphemisms mean the cosmetic word or foggy word. Speakers always use metaphor, cooperation, politeness, disguising, and beautification ways to cover the real meanings of words so that sensitive things become acceptable.

2.2. Political euphemisms

Politicians are disreputable for their employment of words, which areused for disguising functions. [2]. In the political field, politicians tend to confuse people to accept their statements and reduce their dissatisfaction.

2.3. American cultural background

In western modern political society, elections affect and determine politicians' fate to a great extent. Politicians are extremely sensitive to voters' reactions. They must avoid the unpleasant associations that their language may arouse among voters [3]. Douglas regards the concern for purity as a main subject at the heart of every society: ―By defining what is polluted, people classify their social life into two opposite categories: acceptable and unacceptable one. For politicians, they are natural to desire people's support and maintain their social status. When the Second World War finished, due to the differences in its economic strength and social system, the United States competed with the Soviet Union for hegemony in the international arena for a long time, launched an arms race, and often arbitrarily judged and meddled in the internal affairs of other countries under various excuses. The US President's comments were typical in these ways. Many of its various political euphemisms are closely related to these fields [3].

3. Literature Review

Euphemism is an important and special linguistic phenomenon and its special feature lies in not speaking directly. This linguistic phenomenon runs through the whole process of verbal communication in human society and involves many fields of social life. Political euphemism is a category of euphemism, which is divided according to the scope of euphemism. This kind of euphemism often has obvious political purposes and political tendencies and is a very important political means. Political euphemism is mainly used in government documents, mass media, and government speeches. Political euphemisms are often used when political scandals and major political events occur. Euphemisms are used by governments to avoid conflict, to cover up political scandals, to build public opinion for their wars, and to justify unreasonable behavior.

George Orwell in *Politics and the English Language* [4] pointed out that the use of political euphemisms varies between parties, but whether they are conservative or anarchist, they use euphemisms to make lies sound reasonable, to make killing seem honorable, to justify untenable claims.

Hugh Rawson traced the origin and formation mechanism of political euphemism in his work [5].

American scholars Neaman and Sliver comprehensively introduced the use of euphemism in government, military, and international affairs in *KindWords: A Treasure of Euphemisms* [6], and reached the conclusion that the use of euphemism by the government aims to cover up the truth. *In Euphemism and Dysphemism* [7], Allan and Burridge analyzed the causes, development, classification, and functions of political euphemism.

Previous studies on euphemism are mostly generalized and theoretical, but there is no fine study on a part, which makes relevant research work develop in depth. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze American euphemisms in the political field from the potential relationships between the avoidance and disguising functions. This research perspective is chosen so that the focus of the researchers can be relatively concentrated, thus obtaining a deep insight into the research object. Moreover, this research will help people have a deeper understanding of the unique phenomenon of American political euphemism.

4.   Method

This part is divided into three parts, each illustrating the methodology, method, and techniques the writer chose to use in the data analysis.

This study combined qualitative and quantitative together, which is known as the mixed methods. The reasons for our choice are complex. Researchers considered that L2 learners may lack American culture, so people have difficulty understanding the potential meanings of euphemisms used in American politics [8]. It is also an obstacle for writers to continue data analysis. Second, is that euphemisms in the political field are a social topic that is quite complex to determine only using quantitative or qualitative methods. All of our data are not shown as numbers, so it is hard to use a statistics strategy to make experiments or tabulate the numbers. The qualitative part: Researchers deduced from former theories, for example, we read the essays that euphemisms have functions such as politeness, avoidance, beautification, and corporation [9]. The materials were dug, applied the theory, and found the euphemisms that are congruent with the theory.

The quantitative part: means inducing from the raw data and concluding as a new theory or proving the hypothesis mentioned in the introduction. In this research, the data is about people's written or spoken words used in the political field, researchers collected them and found the law of their emergency.

The qualitative part: means deducing from former theories and applying them to the materials. Those theories tend to test the hypothesis people have and assess the potential relationship between the frequency of euphemisms and the specific field.

The test in the research using mixed method. The researchers collect the data and analyze the appearance frequency and the position they appear (quantitative method), aiming to induce the conclusion. The qualitative method is combined, applying the former theories to test the hypothesis and deduce to the final conclusion. It is the research strategy used in the paper. In the topic, the case study is the main strategy. The materials are all published reports in the newspaper and celebrity speeches, they have appeared in certain cases and conditions. So the analysis is based on each of the cases.

4.1.   Research techniques

The techniques and procedures are content analysis and discourse analysis. Because all the materials are words from readings. And the raw materials are people's spoken words, their difference depends on people's different talking habits, so the analysis is based on the content and discourse.

5.   Data

First, the primary data comes from a representative part of the corpus selected from the speeches of American presidents. Four speeches by Trump were selected. For example, "And we prize the culture that sustains our liberty - a culture built on strong families, deep faith, and fierce independence." and President Donald J. Trump's State of the Union Address.

Second, the primary data are selected from the most representative magazines and newspapers in the United States, such as *Time*, and *The New York Times*. Eight news reports are selected in total. For example, "The GOP is being run by 'fruit loops'. It's a party that's slowly but surely being taken over by wackos." and *The Growing Dangers of Trump's Trade War with China.*

The data is appropriate because in diplomacy, presidential campaigns, public speaking, and other contexts, politicians often use euphemisms to cover up something and put on a moderate veneer for tough policies. Also the use of euphemism is one of the characteristics of American newspapers, which are often linked with political parties. The study of a large number of political euphemism is helpful for English learners to understand American cultural values and to solve some cross-cultural communication problems.

6.   Analysis

In this part, writers choose 6 materials as examples to use the methods which are mentioned above to analyze. The materials include 2 speeches of celebrities, 4 political reports in the leading newspapers.

6.1.   President Donald J. Trump's State of the Union Address

In this speech, euphemisms appear 60 times. (135 words/5150 words). The euphemisms are almost 3% in the whole speech. (It seems a small proportion, but this speech appeared in the Union, the celebrity converted his greeting to the world, and there were plenty of examples which were also euphemisms because he planned to overgeneralize the real condition to inspire American courage [10], but it is hard to use words to collect. Writers will show examples next. Here are some examples:

a) "during the 2008 recession" in the speech, the lecturer uses "recession" instead of "economic risk". The 2008 economic crisis had a great negative influence on people's lives and was almost destructive for the whole country. "Recession" means economic decline, the degree of the word is obviously weakened. Trump used euphemisms to weaken the shadow cast by the economic crisis in people's memories.

b) In his speeches, he called all the veterans as heroes and only emphasized their love for the country without mentioning the invasion that American militaries have done. "Our amazing veterans as heroes who deserve our total and unwavering support". He only applied mentioned one soldier to prove his statement was correct. He avoided mentioning the negative part of American militaries, using overgeneration to cover the unpleasant things. This strategy is one kind of function of euphemisms which is called avoidance.

c) In the speech, he said, "But now they are all coming back." He only uses car industry to cover all industries. Although the car industry revived its engine again, it could not represent all industries. In this case, Trump used euphemisms to enlarge the pleasant side, and disguise the unpleasant side. It can reduce people's dissatisfaction on the president, and beautify the reality to gain more support.

All above are three typical examples the celebrity using euphemisms' avoidance and disguising functions to enhance their own status and gain more support from citizens.

"We withdrew from the Human Rights Council, and we will not return until real reform is enacted." The euphemism "real reform" undoubtedly have a profound impact on popular thinking, which in turn will prompt people to question the reforms currently being implemented by the United Nations. However, through the analysis of the cognitive mechanism behind it, it is not difficult to find that "real reform" here actually means "the reform in the interest of the United States ".In order to address such unreasonable demands around the world, he chose to take a euphemistic and implicit approach.

6.2. President Donald J. Trump's speech at the United Nations in 2018

6.2.1. Euphemism collections

In this speech, euphemisms appear 55 times. (152 words/3624 words). The euphemisms are almost 4% in this speech. In this speech, Trump used a large number of euphemisms to cover up and evade the problems existing in American society and some of his biased views on other world events. Writers will show examples next. Here are some examples:

"And we prize the culture that sustains our liberty-- a culture built on strong families, deep faith, and fierce independence." The culture advocated and encouraged by the ruling party must serve its class interests rather than democracy in the true sense. Here "liberty" really means "ruling". Under the pressure of public opinion, the rulers must not openly mention the concept of "culture that sustains our ruling/ruling class", and instead hide it behind "democracy" to mislead the public and win the support of the public. Below are the reports in the leading newspaper:

a) *Iraq Report: Civilian Deaths Decrease*:

On January 1, the United States will begin what is ostensibly the last phase of its military occupation of Iraq. The author of the paper used "military occupation" to lessen the invasion's severity. The war tended to become lawful as euphemisms were used to cover up the unjust activities of the U.S. military.

"Despite the overall decline of violence……" The reporter uses data to indicate America's military invasion does reduce dangers in Iraq. Although the number of people killed by incidence reduced, this kind of data cannot prove Iraq is "vastly more secure." under the American military. It is also an overgeneration to avoid exposing the real purpose of the American military. And give it a positive figure.

b) *Census Shows How Recession Hit N.Y.*:

Many New Yorkers are experiencing "financial distress", the reporter uses "financial distress" instead of economic crisis, which has a higher degree of negative impact on American economic policy. As one of the leading newspapers in America, the political reports need to cater to the trend and safeguard the national image. Euphemisms are used to avoid people losing confidence in the national economy.

The writer uses "out of work for a long time" to represent people losing their jobs. This euphemism avoid hurting people's self-respect, and try to decline the hurt to the least degree.

Like the examples above, this report also includes "economic depression", and" recession" as euphemisms.

c)*The Growing Dangers of Trump's Trade War with China.*

A hit of this nature wouldn't be enough to cause the world economy into a "recession". Also, he show the analysis made by Goldman warned that the reaction of the financial markets was "potentially the most important transmission channel". Sentiment in the markets 'might well deteriorate significantly if the newsflow remains negative,' it said."

The paragraph first states the view that the trade war will not lead to a global recession, and then the reporter turns to quote other analysts to express his view that if the Sino-US trade war continues, financial market conditions may continue to deteriorate.

In the report, he cite the word said by Dalio, he mentioned that government should "imagine the other types of wars (e.g., capital, military, etc.)", which may trigger conflicts between US and China.

Here, the author uses Dalio's point of view to further raise the serious consequences that the trade war may lead to: a capital war or military war between China and the United States. It might be hard to accept this idea directly, so the authors present this possibility in their report by using indirect quotes.

In analyzing the terrible consequences of the trade war, the US reports generally use a lot of indirect quotes, because it may be difficult to accept these terrible consequences directly, and through the analysis of others, readers can have a better psychological construction before accepting the information.

The deal negotiated by both two sides is aimed to avoid "a full-scale conflict that would inflict considerable hurt on both countries" "On Wall Street, analysts have been warning that an early resolution to the dispute is unlikely and that the economic fallout could be significant."

In the above two sentences, "conflict" and "dispute" represent the trade war provoked by the United States. According to the Oxford Dictionary, "conflict" and "dispute" emphasize the disagreement or argument between two parties of interest, while war emphasizes the hegemonism, plunder and occupation of one party over the other. The trade war is a unilateral trade war set off by the United States against China. In order to guide public opinion and highlight the conflict between the two countries, the American media chose the word "conflict", which has a broader meaning, to achieve the purpose of beautifying facts.

d)Obama details opposition to extending tax cuts for the wealthy

"The GOP is being run by "fruit loops". It's a party that's slowly but surely being taken over by wackos."

In politics, the US has a two-party system, and the struggle between the two parties has always existed, all for the benefit of their respective parties. In the election, the infighting between the two parties is widespread. The background was Obama's explicit opposition to tax cuts for the wealthy and his broadside against Republican policy mistakes. In order to avoid conflict, Obama used "fruit loop" to mean "behave abnormally", and "slowly" was a reference to the ignorance and delay of the Republican Party. "Fruit loop" and "slowly" ostensibly showed Obama's tolerance for the mistakes of the Republican Party, but in fact, Obama skillfully attacked the Republican Party.

7.   Conclusions

In conclusion, the cases that this study chose from newspapers and speeches account for the hypothesis the author came up with: there is a relationship between the frequency of euphemisms in specific political fields. According to our data analysis, euphemisms are used more frequently in the political field.

To account for such a result, researchers tended to search as many as possible essays to expand their minds and find the most appropriate methods to take on the research. They applied the appropriate theories to the matched data. What data they chose are all from the official origins, which can represent America's political field. However, because of the limitation of resources and time, researchers believe more evidence and data are needed for confirmation.

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