

# *Analysis of Japanese Euphemisms from the Perspective of Metonymy*

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**Abstract**—This paper probes into the formation mechanism of euphemism in Japanese referring to metonymy cognitive model. And the result shows that metonymy is an important way to generate Japanese euphemism. In the process of euphemism replacing taboos, the correlation between the source domain (euphemism) and the target domain (taboo) is the key factor. People apply this correlation to language expression; replacing direct, vulgar claims with indirect, implicit expressions. There are many researches from the traditional semantics and pragmatics. However, this paper makes a further analysis of Japanese euphemism from the perspective of metonymy cognition.

**Keywords**—Japanese; Euphemism; taboo words; metonymy

## I. INTRODUCTION

Euphemism is ubiquitous in any language. It originated from taboo phenomenon and it is one of the ways to avoid taboo words. Those unlucky or unpleasant words in life are classified as taboo words. When they have to be mentioned, they are often replaced with euphemisms. The interpretation of euphemism in the Japanese Dictionary of Mandarin Studies is: "Speaking avoids assertion, direct and explicit, and expresses it in a roundabout way." In the process of communication, indirect, subtle, and elegant language should be used instead of those expressions that are too direct, explicit, and vulgar, so as to take care of the psychology of the recipient. And at the same time, it can maintain a harmonious communication environment. Due to the Japanese respect for indirect, implicit, heart-to-heart way of communication, so the euphemism in Japanese is very rich.

## II. THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF JAPANESE EUPHEMISM

The Japanese are characterized by introverted, implicit, and harmonious language psychology and thinking way. And it is mainly determined by Japan's specific physical and geographical conditions and Japanese social culture. Japan is a country with a narrow territory. It was surrounded by the sea and a single nation (the Yamato nation). The common race, the common language background, has created the common life habit, the common way of thinking. Due to the narrow circle of their lives, people communicate frequently within the collective. And in order to establish a good interpersonal relationship with the neighbors and make them gain a better position in the collective. When people get along with others, they advocate "harmony is more important", and the spirit of

"harmony" is deeply rooted in people's hearts. In terms of language expression, people try to avoid straightforward statements. And gradually form a more euphemistic expression of compassion. This gradually formed a compassionate and more euphemistic way of expression. In addition, Japan has a unique natural condition. People can enjoy the beautiful natural scenery all year round. The hazy moonlight, the misty snow, the misty beauty of Fuji, all of which make the Japanese intoxicated. Euphemism is also reflected in the language. The Japanese do not want to make things too clear. They like euphemism, jealousy, heart-to-heart, and especially appreciate the implicit meaning. They think that elegant things are things that are difficult to understand. The more implicit and linguistic expressions are, the more they can show the cultivation and identity of the speaker. It is this language aesthetic orientation that makes euphemisms widely used in daily life in Japan.

There are many types of euphemisms, such as pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, punctuation and symbols, rhetoric, context, and social aspects. There are more than 20 size categories, but regardless of the angle of classification, it revolves around a center, that is, "alternative". Euphemism uses a variety of related or similar words to represent it. It uses all aspects of language, creating a new word in terms of form and content. This is a typical metonymy operation. Further to say, although construction ways of the euphemism partially used implicit attributes to map to the other side. Instead based on similarity, grouping and then creating connections. It focused on "generation". So in the final analysis, no matter from the emergence, development, formation of euphemism or from the aspect of its function, the basic operation mechanism of euphemism is anything but various "substitutes". This is the most essential connotation of euphemism. Therefore, it can be said that euphemism and metonymy have the same working mechanism. Euphemism is metaphorical in nature, which is using related or adjacent composition and operation.

## III. A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO METONYMY THEORY

With the rise and development of cognitive linguistics, metonymy is no longer only regarded as an ordinary rhetoric, but is one of the universal ways of thinking shared by human beings, and an important means for human beings to understand the objective world. Metonymy has a conceptual essence. Lakoff proposed the concept of "Idealized Cognitive Model" (ICM) when studying metonymy. ICM is an organized knowledge domain of concept structure. Metonymy mapping occurs in the same concept domain, that is, one category in the

same concept domain is used to replace another category. [1] Metonymy has both referential and understanding functions. Radden points out that metonymy is a cognitive process in which one conceptual entity (origin domain) provides a psychological channel for understanding another conceptual entity (target domain) in the same ideal cognitive model. [2] According to Panther and Radden, metonymy is the cognitive process of constructing ICM. According to Panther and Radden, metonymy is the cognitive process of constructing ICM. The source domain and the target domain are in the same ICM. The source domain is the reference point and the target domain is activated [3].

Metonymy involves the “proximity” and “relevance” of things. Lakoff pointed out that metonymy is a cognitive phenomenon in which “partial and global relationships” are expressed and understood in the same idealized cognitive model. That is to say, one part can be used to recognize another part or the whole, or the whole part can be used to recognize that the two have contact or proximity (contiguity). [1] Radden summarized the types of metonymic cognitive models on the basis of previous studies. He divides “the metonymy between the whole and the parts” as: Things-partial patterns, component patterns, complex event patterns, category-member patterns, and category-feature models; the “metaphor between part and part” is divided into: action mode, causal mode, production mode, control mode, possession mode, tolerance mode, etc. [2]

With the deepening of the study of metonymy, the domestic Japanese community began to try to interpret various linguistic phenomena in Japanese from the perspective of metonymic cognition. Such as Xu Cihui, Yang Jing from the perspective of metonymy to explain how the Japanese object in the object is transferred to the object of the object [4]; Deng Xiumei and Zhang Peng used the metonymy theory to study Japanese buzzwords [5]. The author finds that in Japanese euphemism, cognitive motivation based on “proximity” and “relevance” can be found everywhere. This kind of “proximity” and “relevance” are the metonymy mechanism in terms of language form. Therefore, this thesis attempts to explain the linguistic phenomenon of euphemism in Japanese from the perspective of metonymy cognition, and draws on Radden’s classification to focus on the metonymy generation mechanism of Japanese euphemism [2].

#### IV. THE METONYMY FORMATION MECHANISM OF JAPANESE EUPHEMISM

In language communication, metaphor cognition is often used as an “alternative strategy” for the purpose of euphemism. When the expression of something is too direct, vulgar, and unpleasant, it is often replaced by something adjacent or related; to avoid the ugly or embarrassing side of something by means of metaphorical euphemisms, and to highlight the beautiful and pleasant side of something. Especially in vocabulary involving body organs, appellation, sex, excretion, fertility, disease, death, etc., it is especially common to use euphemism instead of taboo words.

#### A. Metonymy between whole and part

##### 1) Subject-part pattern

The whole of things is made up of parts. In the euphemism formed by this pattern, people often replace part with whole in order to enlarge the category of reference and blur the embarrassing and unpleasant semantic features in some words. Sex-related body organs are considered vulgar and indecent to say directly, while Japanese is often replaced by a larger range of part. For example, in life, the whole “chest” is replaced by the partial “breast”. The part of the “genitals” has been replaced by “the whole of the lower body”.

Of course, there is also a situation which using the more prominent feature in place of the whole. In Japanese, “old” often means weak, coveted, giving people a negative and negative impression. Therefore, when it comes to things related to them, people of old age should not be treated with the word “old people”. It should be instead of the word “シルバー/white hair”. For example: “シルバーシート/ Special seat for the elderly”, “シルバーサービス/ Elderly services”, “シルバー産業 / Elderly industry” and so on. The old man’s hair is silvery white, so white hair is a part of the whole man, which is a partial representation of the whole.

##### 2) Component pattern

The substance or material that makes up the object can be used to replace the whole object. When the Japanese mentioned the condom, they generally did not directly say “コンドーム”, but instead of using the ingredient “ゴム/rubber”, it was more subtle and elegant.

##### 3) Complex event patterns

Complex events often contain several sub-events. In Japanese euphemism, more implicit sub-events or parts of events are often used to express the whole event. They belong to the relationship of time proximity, that is, they occur continuously or simultaneously in time. Sexual behavior involves people’s privacy, which often makes people feel uncomfortable. Therefore, since ancient times, it has been a topic that people are jealous of. For example, in *Tale of Genji*, “the thing of men and women” is called “事の乱れ”. [6] In the *Collection of the Past and Present Objects* the phrase “契る / swearing” is used as a euphemism for sexual behavior between men and women. [7] In modern Japanese, “寝る / sleeping”, “抱く / hugging” and so on are always be used. Metonymic behavior is the use of this series of behaviors in the proximity and continuity of time, the choice of more implicit behavior instead of the need to avoid and taboo behavior.

##### 4) Category - Member Mode

The relationship between the category and its members is also similar to the whole and part. The category vocabulary replaces the member vocabulary. It can expand the semantic scope. It can also blur and fade the unpleasant features of certain member vocabulary. Due to the ancient Japanese folklore taboo bleeding, the female physiological phenomenon “月経” was included in the “赤不浄” taboo. Although the concept of “赤不浄” in modern Japanese has died out, it still avoids mentioning “月経” directly and replaces it with the overall concept of “physiology”. The words associated with

this have “生理日 / 来例假的日子”, “生理休暇/ 例假休假”and so on. And for example, in terms of appellation, in order to eliminate occupational discrimination and gender discrimination in Japan, in 2001, the “保母” and “看護婦” were renamed as “保育士” and “看護師” respectively. The original names “保母” and “看護婦” refer to women, it is easy to bring about gender discrimination. While In the new appellation, the meanings of the terms “士” and “師” are not only compatible with male and female members, but also the degree of respect in wording is improved. This makes the title of the profession more decent and easier to win respect.

### 5) Category-Feature Mode

Each category has its own characteristics. Features also belong to the part of the category. When the use of category vocabulary is too straightforward, that makes people feel embarrassed. We can use its characteristics to refer to the whole thing. Japanese people pursue harmony in interpersonal relationships. They always pay more attention to each other's self-esteem when speaking. Taboo is too directly to expose other people's physical defects. In language activities, they make a euphemistic description of the characteristics of things. “めくら, つんぼ, おし, びっこ”(Blind, deaf, dumb, lame) was replaced with “目 / 耳 / 口 / 足の不自由な人”(eyes / ears / mouth / legs and feet are inconvenient). “気違い / 瘋子”, “痴呆” was replaced with “精神障害者 / 精神障碍者”, “知的障害者 / 智能障碍者”, and so on.

### B. Metonymy between parts

In the same cognitive domain, one conceptual entity is used to replace another conceptual entity, and the euphemism is obtained through the metonymy between parts.

#### 1) Action mode

The action mode involves various elements related to the action, including tools, objects, results, methods, destinations, time, etc., which can produce metonymy relationships in all parts of the same cognitive domain. The most taboo thing in life is death. There are said to be more than 50 euphemisms related to "death" in Japanese. Among them, the euphemism in action mode is the accompanying action with destinations such as “目をつぶる/eyes closed”, “天国へ行く / goes to the Heavenly Kingdom”, “他界する / To his world”. And accompanying action with results such as “隠れた/ hide”, “消える / disappear”. These wording avoids the fear and uncertainty of words such as “死ぬ, death” and so on, which makes both parties feel comfortable. In addition, the etymological origin of the word “泥棒 / thief” is: in ancient times, thieves used to hide their eyes while stealing, and often painted “泥 / mud” on their faces and hold a crime tool “棒 / stick” in their hands. Therefore, the term also belongs to the relationship of the instrumental-substitute actors.

#### 2) Causality mode

Reasons and results are interdependent and can be referred to each other. Although illness is inevitable, people yearn for health and longevity, and therefore, they do not like to talk about disease directly involved. The commonly used alternative expressions in Japanese are “医者にかかる / see a

doctor”, “具合が悪い / uncomfortable” and so on. “医者にかかる”, “具合が悪い” are the result of “病気 / illness” so they belong to metonymy of result generation. In addition, Euphemism for “pregnancy”, “おめでた / happy event”, “おなか大きい / Big stomach”, the two expressions are also the result of the use of the results to euphemism their causes—“pregnancy”.

### 3) Other modes

The metonymy between part and part, in addition to the two cases mentioned above, also involves the production model and the inclusion model. The production mode refers to the fact that the producers, products, trademarks, manufacturing sites and other elements involved in production can be referred to each other. For example, “マールボロ / Marlboro” is obviously a trademark metaphor for its product. And the containment pattern is mainly the mutual reference between the container and the contents of the container. For example, “一杯飲みましょう / Have a drink”. Here “a cup” turns to “お酒”. The cup is used to hold the wine, and there is a relationship between the two, and the container is used to refer to the contents of the container. In Chinese, "Greek Cup" is also used as a metaphor for "love drinking."

## V. CONCLUSION

In the process of euphemism replacing taboos, the correlation between the origin domain (euphemism) and the target domain (taboo language) is the key factor. People apply this correlation to language expression, replacing direct, vulgar expressions with indirect and implicit expressions. Euphemism played a role in disguising and beautifying the taboo language, but it did not obscure the true intention of the speaker. With the use of metonymy cognitive mechanism, euphemism provides a psychological channel for understanding taboos. The implicature is carried out effectively and the implicit and tactful expression effect is realized. This paper discusses the formation mechanism of Japanese euphemism by referring to the metonymic cognitive model induced by radden. The results show that metonymy plays an important role in formation of Japanese euphemism.

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