

A Semantic Study of Euphemism in British TV Drama—*Downton Abbey*(1st season)

Xiao-Wei LI^{a,*}, Zhi-Hong LU^b

100876, School of Humanities in Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications, No.10
XiTucheng Road, HaiDian District, Beijing, China

^alixiaoweisally@bupt.edu.cn, ^bluzhihong@bupt.edu.cn

*Corresponding author

Key words: Euphemism, Word meaning, Language features

Abstract. Euphemism, as a common linguistic phenomenon in social communication, has been shining its unique lights to smoothen the effectiveness of people's social communications. In this paper, the author will give a detailed explanation about the euphemisms in British TV drama *Downton Abbey* from the perspective of word meaning in semantics, thus showing the importance of proper using of euphemism in English.

Introduction

Euphemism is an important form of language developed by people who wanted to create idealized communicative effects in the process of socializing. By using euphemism, bold or direct words can be avoided to make sure that nobody in the conversation gets hurt mentally. Euphemism is considered as lubricant applied in coordinating interpersonal relationships. It is really important and practical to know some phenomena in English euphemism from the perspective of semantics.

This paper combines the language corpus collected from the 1st season in British TV drama *Downton Abbey*. By focusing on the linguistic features, especially together with lexical meaning of English euphemism, the author will give brief explanations about the using of euphemism and probes the changes and understandings in English euphemisms.

Literature Review

Euphemism was originated from *eu* (good) and *pheme* (speak) in Greek language, meaning pleasant language.

There are several literally definitions cited as follows:

- ♦ Use of polite, soft, or indirect words or phrases instead of more accurate or direct or rude ones; (*Oxford advanced learner's English-Chinese Dictionary*, 1997)
- ♦ The use of a word which is thought to be less offensive or unpleasant than another word; (*Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching*, applied linguistics, 2000)
- ♦ A mild or indirect word or expression substituted for one considered to be too harsh or blunt when referring to something unpleasant or embarrassing; (*The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, 2003)
- ♦ A word or expression that people use when they want to talk about something unpleasant or embarrassing with mentioning the thing itself. (*Macmillan English-Chinese dictionary*, 2005)

Simply speaking, euphemism is a sort of language expressed in a direct or soft way to show politeness. (Peng: 2004)

Exactly speaking, euphemism is not a mere language phenomenon, for that it come into life with the uprising of taboo (Zhu: 1998). In people's life, there are something caused by politics, religion, affection or psychology, making people cannot directly express what they want to say, were taboos. While people chose to speak things out by exchanging taboos with implicit or indirect ways by using euphemisms. Euphemisms contain many phenomena of lexical change, while these changes

are not same with either the changes in lexicology or in rhetorical concepts (Wang: 1983).

Euphemism like “blow one’s cool” or “blow a gasket” all mean “angry” in English language without directly changing the lexical meaning of the words, but these expressions are more comfort for people to receive. This exchange of unpleasant or bad-association-causing words/phrases to more comfort and pleasant ones makes euphemism unique and distinctive in semantics. Word “grave” can be changed into euphemisms like “final resting place” or “garden of sleep,” thus making language more vivid and acceptable. Euphemism makes irritant words into moderate ones by using different ways of rhetorical devices, such as simile, metaphor, metonymy, and so on. (Zhu: 1998)

The main semantics characteristics of euphemism are commendation, implicitness, contemporaneity, nationality, and fraudulence (Pan: 2004). This paper will give detailed analysis of euphemisms in *Downton Abbey* based on these main semantic characteristics.

Case study of English euphemism in Downton Abbey

Introduction of *Downton Abbey*

Downton Abbey is a famous British TV series created by Julian Fellowes. *Downton Abbey* series have won numerous awards in British, including Britain’s National Award for the Best TV Drama, Best Mini Series for Amy & Golden Globe and so on. The language contents used in it covered a lot of ground in linguistics, which varies in forms and structures to show how the great charms of euphemism and other language features.

The series is mainly talking about the familial fall and rise caused by property inheritance in Lord Grantham. The tone of the series is full of humor and euphemisms. These euphemism devices include lexical, grammatical, and rhetorical, contributing greatly to depicting the characters and plots. As a language case study, the conversation of the upper nobility and servants are suitable and vivid. For this reason I choose this series as my case study.

The frequent use of euphemism

Downton Abbey is full of euphemism everywhere. The following examples come from different characters in the series. For good understanding, I will explain them one by one by categorizing them into five features: commendation, implicitness, epochal character, fraudulence, and figurativeness.

The Commendation in Euphemism

In order to achieve better effects in communication, people use different words or phrases to show polite or make other people pleasant. People use “slim” / “plump” instead of “skinny” / “fat” to describe a woman, “plain” instead of “ugly”, “average level” instead of “stupid”, and so on.

A. Mr. Carson: Do you find me very ridiculous, Mrs. Hughes? *Putting on air and graces* I’ve no tight to?

Mrs. Hughes: Mr. Carson, you are a man of integrity and honor, who raises the tone of this household by being part of it.

B. Mrs. Crawly: We must all encourage those *less fortunate* to improve their lot where they can.

C. Mathew: It seems we must brush upon our *powers of fascination*.

D. Mr. Carson: I was *no great champion* when he first arrived. But it seems to me he’s tried his best.

Mr. Carson in example A uses “putting on air and graces” to describe himself instead of the word “artificial” or “hypocrisy”, showing his cultivation as a housekeeper in noble family. By comparison, the latter two words are too abrupt and bold during the conversation, especially when one talks to a lady (Mrs. Hughes). Similarly, Mrs. Crawly uses “less fortunate” to express the meaning of “the poor” with more respect and polite. “No great champion” in example C indirectly shows speaker’s attitude in a positive way, though the speaker strongly opposed in the heart.

The Implicitness in Euphemism

People prefer indirect way to express ones thoughts or ideas in case of embarrassment or impoliteness in social communication. As a result, the feature of implicitness in euphemism can be frequently seen.

E. Lawyer: Well, we've given them a memorial in London and a memorial here; I gather they will *put up a stone* to mark those bodies were never found. You'd think the sea would have taken more of them.

F.M: You know what I'm asking?

Mrs. Hughes: *You haven't asked anything yet.*

M: But you know what it is. I'm going to stop here at the pub until I hear from you. Oh, take your time. I'd rather wait for a week *for the right answer than get a wrong one* in a hurry.

G. Cook: He's not the boy for you and you're not the girl for him!

Daisy: Why would he be, he's seen and done so much, and I've been nowhere and done nothing?

Cook: Perhaps Thomas has seen and done more than is good for him. *He's not a lady's man!*

Daisy: Well, isn't it a blessed relief?

Cook: Daisy! Thomas is a *troubled soul*.

Example E happens after the Titanic event. People are talking about how the memorial goes on in London. "Putting up a stone" is the indirect way of speaking "tombstone" or "monument", thus avoid raising the atmosphere of sorrow again among people. Example F depicts a scenario of proposal. M implicitly asks for lady's final answer, which are "right" or "wrong" base on her agreement or not. In example G, a girl got crush on a footman who is a gay, while the girl haven't discovered the reality yet. So cook A exhorted the girl by implying the girl with some characteristics the man had such as "not a lady's man" and "troubled soul". These words are not that direct or offensive, but still can express what the speaker what to imply.

H. Flower Show

A: You may not believe, but I believe the committee feels obliged to give you the cup for the best bloom as a kind of local tradition.

B: No, no, I do not know that, I thought *I usually won* the prize for best bloom in the village because my gardener had grown the best bloom in the village.

A: Yes, *but you don't usually win, do you? You always win.*

I. Lord Grantham: I think I'll *wash the train off* before dinner.

J. Doctor: You understand that women *go through a series certain change*...well, sometimes it can result in a *surge of fertility*, for want of a better word.

In the Flower Show, A blamed B of her imperious, because B controlled the whole competition relied on her lordship so that nobody else could win the first prize of best bloom except her. A has the same level of status as B. A firstly direct point out how the show was conducted under B's operation, while B turned her back upon A and said something not related. Then A tactfully uses the difference between words "usually" and "always", thus making B embarrassing and speechless. From the perspective of lexical, this implicit imply of meaning clearly show the features of euphemism.

In example I, Lord Grantham uses "wash the train off" to imply that he was going to clean himself up. There isn't any change in word meaning, while "wash the train off" seems more formal and reserved, which conforms to the identity of his lordship. The euphemism used in Example J is very interesting because it involves some polite language in the field of medical at that time. The doctor avoided directly saying the word "pregnant" in front of the gentlemen, so he chose the phrase "a surge of fertility" to express in more elegant and implicit way. "A series certain change" means women's physiological change though their life.

The Epochal Character and Fraudulence in Euphemism

Euphemism has existed since ancient times and could be found in Old English (1150 B. C. – 1500 B. C.) literal. Language changed unconsciously with the development of the times, society, religion, and etiquette. Many factors influenced the content of euphemism in various languages, thus featuring euphemism remarkable epochal character.

Different time endows euphemism different contents. "Bristol fashion", which can be seen in literatures or formal conversations, was used in *Downton Abbey* to refer to "in order" or

“well-regulated”, of which people infrequently use in today’s language.

K. Lady Mary: Carson and I are making sure that everything was *shipshape and Bristol fashion*

Euphemism can be delicately used to cover the reality in beautiful veil. Here are some examples:

Industrial action – strike

Less fortunate / underprivileged – poor

Substandard housing – slum

While in example L, Mrs. Hughes made three assumptions to refute what won’t happen. The possibility of “selling the estate” is as same with dying of “tidal wave” / “plague” / “war”. This grammatical structure created great power to fight back what one disagrees, though all the scenarios were imaginary.

L. R: What happens when you retire?

Mrs. Hughes: I should think if I stay here they’ll look after me.

R: Suppose they sell the estate.

Mrs. Hughes: *Suppose there’s a tidal wave? Suppose we all die of the plague? Suppose there’s a war?*
Ha-ha!

The Figurativeness in Euphemism

There are subtle differences between euphemism and figurative devices. The words used as euphemism are same with words in simile or metaphor, because their implications mean a lot in sentences. But simile or metaphor aims at arousing people’s imagination and affection, while euphemism helps people get clear and overall understanding of the sentences.

M. Thomas: We can’t get rid of him just because he talks behind our backs.

Miss Obrien: There is more than one way to *skin a cat*.

N. Doctor: I just wish it was a treatment I was more familiar with.

Mrs. Crawly: Will that serve as your excuse when he dies?

Doctor: I have a feeling we will *sink or swim together*.

In example M, we can vividly feel the malevolence from the phrase “skin a cat”, which means hurt someone secretly. This way of euphemism has the power of empathy, making it clear how hateful the speaker was when she talked with Thomas.

O. Mrs. Patmore: You are always dozy, but tonight you *make sleeping beauty look alert*.

P. Lady Mary: Obrien *has me wrapped in silk and feathers*.

Metonymy and metaphor are used in above two examples, making the whole sentences more vivid, picturesque, and imaginative. In these two sentences, the language forms are stable, while the meaning can be selective and formative.

Conclusions

In this paper, the author studies the euphemistic language in *Downton Abbey* series from the perspective of the lexical, grammatical, and rhetorical way. From the analysis, we can draw the conclusions as follow:

The definitions and classifications of euphemism are shown from the former studies. Euphemism is an indirectly expression used to say something impolite or offensive. Euphemism can be used to make the sentences vivid and pleasant, thus producing sense of humor.

The analysis is based on the language corpus collected from *Downton Abbey*. By focusing on the linguistic features, especially together with lexical meaning of English euphemism, the author has given explanations about the using of euphemism and probes the changes and understandings in English euphemisms. Besides, from the euphemism collected from series, the author categorized them into 5 features relied on Pan’s research: commendation, implicitness, epochal character, fraudulence, and figurativeness.

It is hoped that this paper sheds some light on how to understand and use euphemism to ameliorate the atmosphere and enhance the social relationship from the perspective of semantics. Therefore we can live in happy and warm world which is filled with politeness and harmonious.

Acknowledgement

This study was made possible through the Social and Science Fund Project (2012BS05), supported by Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications in China.

References

- [1] Wu, Song-Chu. The cultural comparison of popular euphemism in contemporary, J. Modern Foreign Language. 1996, (3).
- [2] Yang, Huai-En. English euphemism, J. English Language Learning. 1999, (3):54.
- [3] Xu, Lie-Jiong. Semantics, Language Publishing House, Beijing, 1995.
- [4] Pan, Ji-Liang. Language features of English euphemism, J. Finance Theory and Teaching. 2004, (1).
- [5] Zhu, Ka-De. The Semantic changes and understandings of English euphemisms, J. Journal of Guangdong Education Institute. 1998, (4).
- [6] Wang, De-Chun. Lexicology Study, Shandong Education Press, Jinan, 1983.
- [7] Peng, Jing. A study of euphemistic language in Harry Potter, J. Hang Zhou Normal University, 2012.
- [8] Tang, Gan. A semantic approach to English euphemism, J. Overseas English. 2010 (6).
- [9] Zhou, Qian-Tong. The communicative functions of euphemism in *Downton Abbey*, J. Journal of Changchun Education Institute. 2013, (10).
- [10] Sun, Ling- Ling. The new definition and construction of English euphemism, J. Journal of Xi'an University of Arts and Science, 2010 (8).
- [11] Duan, Ping. Pragmatic study of English euphemism—Principles and ways of using English euphemism, D. Central China University. 2002.