

Translating Euphemisms: Theory and Application

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Abstract: Euphemisms are mild, polite and less distasteful expressions and phrases that replace their offensive equivalence in which culture plays a crucial role in translating them from a language to another different one and they pose difficulty for some translators. Therefore, the cultural awareness of source and target languages is necessary to translate euphemisms accurately as an indirect communication. This paper deals with the social euphemisms that are used in daily life to delicate the offensive aspect of some talks. The main object of this study is to investigate and study how Grice's Implicature Theory (Cooperative Principles and Maxims) and Relevance Theory could assist a clear interpretation of euphemisms. The former, however, focuses on deliberate flouting of maxims of conversation, giving rise to implicature while the later helps for an euphemism comprehension through an optimal relevance by using explicating strategies. The study further investigates the linguistic manifestations as well as the pragmatic inferences while rendering English euphemisms into Arabic and vice versa with special emphasis on the difficulty of the interpretation of euphemism that translator may encounter. This paper suggests some strategies to assist translating the euphemisms from one language into another one precisely.

Key words: Euphemism :Cooperative Principle (CP); Relevance Theory.

ترجمة التلطف: النظرية والتطبيق

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المخلص: يعد التلطف في الكلام طريقة للتعبير عن التهذب والتلطف واللباقة والذوق لتحل محل التعبيرات العداوية والغير المهذبة ، وتلعب الثقافة دورا حاسما في ترجمتها بوضوح من لغة إلى أخرى، والتي قد تسبب في بعض الاحيان صعوبة لبعض المترجمين ، ولذلك فإن الوعي لثقافة المجتمع في اللغة الاصلية واللغة المقابلة هو ضروري لترجمة العبارات الملطفة بدقة كنموذج للتخاطب غير المباشر. يتناول هذا البحث دراسة العبارات الملطفة الاجتماعية التي تستخدم في الحياة اليومية لتهوين حساسية بعض التعبيرات العداوية او الغير مهذبة والتي تستخدم في بعض المحادثات. ان الهدف الرئيسي من هذه الدراسة هو التحقيق ودراسة كيفية تطبيق نظرية غرايس (المبادئ التعاونية وثوابتها) في التعريض، ونظرية الصلة التي يمكن أن تساعد على تفسير اوضح للعبارات الملطفة. حيث تركز النظرية الاولى على التعويم المقصود للثوابت الاساسية للحديث، مما يؤدي إلى ظهور حالة التعريض في حين تركز النظرية الثانية على كيفية فهم المعنى المقصود من التلطف باستخدام استراتيجيات معينة. كما يتطرق البحث لدراسة بعض المظاهر اللغوية والاستنتاجات البراغمية للعبارات الملطفة اثناء ترجمتها من الإنجليزية إلى العربية والعكس بالعكس مع التركيز بصفة خاصة على صعوبة تفسير التلطف التي تواجه المترجم اثناء عملية الترجمة. كما تم اقتراح في هذه الدراسة بعض الاستراتيجيات لمساعدة ترجمة العبارات الملطفة من لغة إلى اخرى.

الكلمات الأساسية: التلطف، المبادئ الأساسية لنظرية غرايس، نظرية العلاقة (الصلة).

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Introduction

People sometimes have to change speech to suit certain situations and use acceptable expressions that might not hurt the feeling of others. Also, we might use tough or harsh words when criticizing or scorning people who deserve to be scorned. This kind of talk is essential in order not to harm people's feeling and consequently not to create problems arising from inadequate communication.

Etymologically, Greek euphemismos, from euphemos 'auspicious, sounding good', from eu+ pheme 'speech', from phania 'speak (1681). Euphemism is generally defined as "the use of a mild or indirect expression instead of one that is harsh or unpleasant" (The World Book Dictionary, 1979: 731). That is to say, the substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive expression for one that may offend or suggest something unpleasant. The word also means the expression so substituted.

Larson (1984: 116) notes that "euphemism is used to avoid an offensive expression or that is socially unacceptable, or one that is unpleasant". In case of *death*, a speaker says 'pass away' instead of *die*, thus he avoids the unpleasant idea of death sympathizes with the hearer or the receptor hence absorbing the shock that it hearts badly in such event. It is also considered a polite way to inform people about losing a dear person.

Allan and Burridge (1991:p.14) offer the following definition:

"Euphemisms are alternatives to dispreferred expressions, and are used in order to avoid possible loss of face. The dispreferred expression may be taboo, fearsome, distasteful or for some other reason have too many negative connotations to felicitously execute Speaker's communicative intention on a given occasion".

The above definition, it should be noted, takes an explicit account of politeness aspect of "face", which is basic to euphemism. The notion of face is a key factor to understanding the speaker's intentions and subsequently the lexical correlates in his utterance. Thus, *face* is important in choosing our utterances. It is also important in understanding the intentions of this utterance because "what we say is likely to maintain, enhance, or damage our own face" (Allan & Burridge 1991: 5).

However, it has been argued that politeness is the main motivation for people to use the strategy of indirectness and consequently become euphemistic. This being the case, euphemistic utterances would seem problematic to translation. Thus, euphemisms fall into the category of the dynamic and two-way communicating activity, e.g. a pragmatic activity.

In Arabic there is a similar rhetorical device to that of implicature in English. Al-Zamakhshari (died in 538 H) is the first who explicated euphemisms and implicature in his interpretation of Holy Quran (Al-Shammery, 2001:388). Implicature in Arabic is called "Al-talwīH" (literally waving). Arabs who were interested in the study of rhetoric had good contributions to this field for a very long time back in history.

Based on the principles of pragmatics, this paper aims to discuss the pragmatic elements of euphemism by studying the formation (writer/speaker) and receipt (receiver). It emphasizes how the translator understands and translates euphemism

through the translation process. For this purpose two theories are being implemented namely Grice's Implicature Theory (1975) as well as his CP (Cooperative Principles & Maxims) and the Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson 1986).

CP focuses on deliberate flouting of maxims of conversation, giving rise to implicature while Relevance helps euphemism comprehension through optimal relevance by using explicating strategies. Furthermore, special attention is given to Arabic euphemisms.

Arabic Euphemisms

As mentioned above that Arabs have tackled the phenomenon in language, Al-*"Taerid"* (1996:173), for example defines euphemism linguistically as follows:

هو ما يشار به إلى المطلوب من بُعد، مع خفاء (Al-Suyuti 2004: 98). The English translation of this text is: "Alluding to the intended meaning indirectly, i.e., by means of implicature". For instance, if you say to someone whom you expect help from "I came to say hi and look at your generous face", then you would be taken to be requesting help from that person (Al-Tibi, 1996:173).

It should be emphasized also that Arab rhetoricians have dealt with the phenomenon of euphemisms more or less in the same manner of English language, and have given it different names, as "Allusion is the utterance indicating the meaning by means of context rather than the literal or the figurative meaning" (Bin Al-Athir, 1962:56), or "TalwiH" as defined by Bin Wahab (1974:346)

وألاح بثوبه ولوح به: اخذ طرفه بيده من مكان بعيد ثم أداره و لمع به ليريه من الاح بسيف ولوح: لمع به وحركه. The English translation of this text is:

"To brandish one's sword repeatedly. That is, to move and make it come in sight. To wave one's dress repeatedly, i.e., to take with one's hand one far end of the dress and then to turn and wave it till it becomes within the sight of the one whom he would like to see".

It is obvious that Arab scholars emphasize the fact that the notion of implicature (whether it is called *"Taerid"*, or *"TalwiH"*) is concerned with the inner or hidden meaning that is not distinguishable from what is said, i.e. from the literal and conversational meaning of the uttered words. A good story of implicature which illustrates this point goes as follows:

One of Khosrau's leaders was told that the king (Khosrau) betrayed him by making love with his wife. The leader, then, left his wife did not go to bed with her any more. And the wife complained to the king about her husband's behavior. The king summoned her husband and said: I am informed that you have a fresh fountain of water and you don't drink from it, what is the reason beyond that? The man replied:

O king. I was told that a lion frequent that fountain, so I was scared. The king was very impressed by his reply and ordered that a reward be given to him. (Bin-Al-Athir, 1962: 75)

Obviously, from the leader's utterance the king has inferred that the leader knows of his wife's relation with him, and he was impressed by the way the leader had conveyed that to him. Arab rhetoricians such as Al-Jurjānī (2004) and Ibin Qutayba (n.d.) argue that the Arabs have used euphemisms intensively in their speech to

العين that it is euphemized as (generous eye) because Arabs believe that the sight will concentrate into one eye and that eye is gracious tender.

Euphemisms have a large bearing on taboos in language. Language taboos stem from people's incorrect understanding of the relations between language and objective world. *Taboo* is a word that has supernatural power, as in the Hebrew deity name. Also, the demands of politeness place us in a double bind: on one hand, we want to be friendly and on the other hand we do not want to be overbearing. Hence, in some versions of English, toilet room, itself an euphemism, was replaced with bathroom and water closet, which were replaced (respectively) with restroom and W.C that might be rendered into Arabic as بيت الراحة (literally, the comfort home); this idiom is used because humans in this place will be alone and there is no limitations or sergeant for their actions, which are usually not allowed in other places, in addition to that it is a place relaxes the body by getting rid of the waste, and thus functioning normally such thinking properly, doing daily exercises, praying and continuing to function as a day-to-day living and doing other hobbies. Other euphemisms for the same purpose are used in daily life like الحمام: (bathroom), المغاسل: (sinks), and الخلاء: (toilet) . There are some other examples of euphemisms which are geographically concentrated: the term "restroom" is rarely used outside of the U.S.A. and "W.C.", where before it was quite popular in Britain is passing out and becoming more popular in France and other countries.

Approaches to Euphemism

The use of euphemisms is in principle a kind of speech act. As stated above two approaches are going to be introduced for the interpretation and understanding the euphemisms. The first approach, and according to Grice, conversational participants should generally observe some conversational principles so as to ensure the success of conversation. Therefore, as a speech act, the use of euphemism should also be subject to the restriction of some principles in conversation. In this section, the author mainly explores the Grice Implicature Theory, CP and the Relative Theory (RT) because it is believed that there is a close relationship between the politeness principle (PP) and the maxims of conversation in the process of euphemizing. More specifically, Farghal 1995 maintains that "euphemisms are viewed as emanating not only from observing the (PP), but also from exploiting the maxims of conversation". The politeness of euphemistic expressions is partly attributed to their indirectness (Brown & Levinson, 1987). It has been argued that politeness is the main motivation for people to use the strategy of indirectness and consequently become euphemistic. This being the case, euphemistic utterances would seem problematic to translation.

Grice's (1975) approach expects people to stick to certain sets of rules in their communication... "The main rule is the Cooperative Principle defined by Grice as follows: make your conversational contribution as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (1989:26).

The CP, on the other hand, enables the hearer in a conversation to communicate on the assumption that the counterpart participant is being cooperative. In this case the CP has the function of regulating the speech so that it contributes to fulfill the discourse goals. Grice assumes that talk exchange is profitable if the participants follow the CP and the maxims. The four maxims are formulated as follows (Grice 1975: 44):

- (1) Maxims of Quantity:
 - a. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
 - b. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
- (2) Maxims of Quality: Try to make your contribution one that is true.
 - a. Do not say what you believe to be false.
 - b. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence
- (3) Maxim of Relation: Be relevant.
- (4) Maxims of Manner: Be perspicuous.
 - a. Avoid obscurity of expression.
 - b. Avoid ambiguity.
 - c. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
 - d. Be orderly.

However, Grice was aware of many occasions when people fail to observe those maxims which can be listed in four ways:

- (1) Opting out
- (2) Maxims clash
- (3) Flouting a maxim
- (4) Violating a maxim

People may fail to observe a maxim because they are either incapable of speaking clearly or they deliberately choose to lie, each of these possibilities is explained below.

- (1) Opting out: A speaker opts out of observing a maxim by indicating unwillingness to cooperate in the way the maxim requires.
- (2) Maxim clash (usually quality versus quantity): The speaker presumably means to observe the CP, and yet he obviously fails to fulfill a maxim because he could not fulfill both maxims at the same level.
- (3) Flouting a maxim: A speaker fails to observe a maxim, not with any intention of deceiving or misleading, but because the speaker wishes to prompt the hearer to look for a meaning which is different from, or in addition to, the expressed meaning. Grice terms the process by which it is generated "flouting or exploiting a maxim".
A flout occurs when a speaker fails to observe a maxim at the level of what is said, with the deliberate intention of generating an implicature.
- (4) Violating the maxim: The speaker is deliberately and secretly subverting the maxim and the CP, which often results in lying (covertly violating the first maxim of Quality).

From the level of expressed meaning to the level of implied meaning, Grice described two different sorts of implicatures: conventional implicature and

conversational implicature. Both convey an additional level of meaning beyond the semantic meaning of the uttered words. Conventional implicature conveys the same implicature, regardless of context, whereas in the case of conversational implicature, what is implied varies according to the context of the utterance.

Conventional implicature is the literal meaning of words of the speaker. Thus, his meaning and the sentence's meaning are equivalent.

Conversational implicature arises out of the flouting or the observance of the conversational maxims.

In Grice's system, there are two main mechanisms. The first, which gives rise to what is sometimes called observance of the maxims, requires the assumption that the speaker is doing his best to follow the cooperative principle, even though the result may not be the best, from the point of view of the hearer. The second involves a flouting or exploiting of the maxims but at the same time the hearer understands the speaker's intention for a sincere communication, i.e., observing the cooperative principle.

Euphemisms usually flout one or more of the maxims of conversation such as the Quantity and Relevance, then giving rise to particularized implicatures. Consequently, flouting plays an important role in the use of euphemism.

The second approach is the RT, which reduced Grice's maxims to one cognitive principle:

- The maxim of Relation. It is implicated in the interpretation of other Gricean maxims, e.g. Quantity – 'maximize relevant information'; Manner – 'don't be irrelevantly verbose, obscure, ambiguous, etc. All the maxims can be disregarded provided a relevant message can be inferred.
- The degree of relevance of a communicated message is governed by two factors:
 1. Cognitive effects: adding new information, strengthening old information, weakening old information, and canceling old information. The greater the contextual effects, the greater the relevance of a particular fact.
 2. Processing effort. The less effort it takes to recover the fact, the greater the relevance of the fact.

In relevance theory, the explicature of an utterance consists of all the propositions that are explicitly communicated by the speaker through the utterance. Obviously, some of the speaker's intentions are encoded in the linguistic forms used and some of it has to be inferred by a relevance-driven process like that, which gives rise to implicatures.

However, conversation is full of potential ambiguities which can be disambiguated by the context. This disambiguation process is relevance driven.

The Communicative Principle of Relevance helps the translator to understand how speaker's meaning in different contexts can be interpreted because the Communicative Principle of Relevance and the notion of optimal relevance are the

keys to relevance-theoretic pragmatics. The notion of optimal relevance is meant to reveal what the hearer of utterance is entitled to expect in terms of effort and effect. An utterance is optimally relevant to the hearer if: (1) It is relevant enough to the hearer's processing effort; (2) It is the most relevant one compatible with communicator's abilities and preferences (Guo, 2006: 4).

The Communicative Principle of Relevance and the definition of optimal relevance suggest a practical procedure for performing these tasks and constructing a hypothesis about the speaker's meaning. The hearer should take the linguistically encoded sentence meaning; following a path of least effort, he should enrich it at the explicit level and complement it at the implicit level until the resulting interpretation meets his expectation of relevance.

Grice's (1975) maxim of relation has been expanded and expounded by Sperber and Wilson (1995) who claim that "relevance" is a fundamental principle in interaction and it succeeds all the other maxims of the Grice's theory, and it is relevant to the discussion of euphemism. When using euphemism, a speaker often flouts the maxim of relation as understood by Grice, in failing to be relevant to the current topic. For example, in the context in which a word may be used, it is unlikely that the speaker would make the word apparently irrelevant. However, by using implicating strategies 1. linguistic decoding 2. enhancement of linguistic decoding: (a) referents; enrichments (b) making ambiguity disappear, the meaning would be clear. Relevance is related to strategies for euphemism comprehension.

On the other hand, Grice's approach to euphemism differs: the meaning of euphemism which is taken by deliberate flouting of maxims of quality, quantity or manner by being indirect. Taking the following euphemistic sentence to illustrate that:

"Excuse me, can you tell me where the restroom is?" The speaker does not observe the maxim of quality that is typical of flouting the maxim of quality because the speaker does not really want to have a rest. (Maxim of quality: sub-maxim: don't say what you believe to be false). However, the social norms do not accept the mechanism---exploiting the maxim in which the implicature arises as to speak directly about the body in public and in the end euphemistic expression has been taken. Thus, the implicature arises and through the context and extra-linguistic knowledge we can work out that the speaker wants to go to the toilet. So euphemism is obvious in situations in which what is meant is not expressed directly.

On Translating Euphemisms

As mentioned above, many different factors, including rhetoric, stylistic, contextual and so on, may affect the pragmatic inference of euphemism by its receiver and eventually the understanding and expressive effect of it. Therefore, it is advisable for the translator to give great importance to these factors while paying constant attention to cross-cultural differences in translating euphemisms. Here we list two elements deserving translators' consideration.

1- Stylistic factor

While translating euphemisms, translators should always bear in mind the stylistic differences in rendering the same euphemism into different writing

styles. A most obvious example is the translation of *die* مات. In English, *die* has at least seventy different expressions, such as *perish, expire, emit the last breathe, end one's days, pass away, cross the Styx, return to the earth, slide into oblivion, shut down, diseased, to kick the bucket, to go to Nirvana, to pay the debt of nature, to join the choir invisible*, etc. In correspondence, death الموت also has many equivalents in Arabic:

انتقل الى رحمة الله، أعطاك عمره، وافته المنية، وافاه الاجل، عند رب كريم، رحمه الله، في ذمة الله، في ذمة الخلود، لقي حتفه، خلصت خبزته، واره الثرى، هلك، انتقل الى الرفيق الاعلى، قامت قيامته.

While translating *die* in a formal style, one may have to avoid the style by the same way, while translating يموت (he dies) into English in an informal or colloquial style, one may choose such words as *kick the bucket, join the majority, to answer the last call*, and so on rather than *perish, expire, croak, etc.* In conclusion, the stylistic factors for the translator's consideration mainly concern the subtle difference between a word's denotation and connotation, its stylistic color as well as its register.

2- Rhetoric factor

According to Larson (1998), in translating euphemisms, one should try to employ the equivalent of euphemistic expression in target language. However, it should also depend on the response of the prospective receiver of it and the condition of the target language, because not every euphemism in the source language has its equivalent in the target language (Guo, 2006:6).

Therefore, one should also desist from blindly seeking equivalent only in form instead of in meaning. The following are two examples for the above-mentioned two different situations.

As a strategy of conversational implicature, euphemism presents confusion to the translator in his attempts to find the English equivalent. To illustrate, consider the underlined Arabic euphemistic expression in its context below:

هذه رغوة الشباب (This is the youth foam) this euphemism indicates the aging for *whiplash* or *inundate* in English.

In translating process, *the* translator has found its equivalent in English and therefore retained the rhetoric feature of the euphemism in the target language. It is a unique interjection in Arabic with strong cultural distinction. However, it is not easy to find the same equivalent (meaning and form) in both source and target language. Therefore, the translator retained its implicature by avoiding formalistic equivalent.

It should be pointed out that although the methodology applied in this work has concentrated on some social euphemisms in English and Arabic usually used by the society in daily life but other corpus from other fields which are abundant such as media, politics, religious discourse, business etc. may be selected as extra examples of euphemism for future studies.

Concluding Remarks

To conclude, it should be emphasized that when it comes to translating euphemistic expressions, priorities should be borne in the translator's mind:

First, the translator should seek to find a parallel euphemism in the target language which more or less has the same euphemistic overtones of the original text.

Second, if a parallel euphemism is not present in the target language. The translator should convey the intended meaning but still preserving the euphemistic thrust of the original.

Third, this is also possible; the translator should try to convey the implied meaning without maintaining the euphemism of the original. In this case, he may refer to the use of neutral terms.

Finally, it should be mentioned that this paper is only an introduction on the translation of euphemisms where some situations, an English euphemistic expression may be used where the same situations might not call for the use of euphemistic expressions in Arabic. For example, unlike the English culture, the Arabic culture euphemizes expressions that have to do with drinking alcohol and getting drunk. This is due to the fact that drinking alcohol is a bad habit and is highly condemned socially and religiously. Thus, translators should be fully aware of this fact in order to decide on the track they follow in translating euphemisms across cultures.

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