

## A Brief Analysis of Euphemism in Daily Life

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**Abstract:** In every society there are certain things that are supposed to be unspeakable. In order to skirt those taboo words or ease the sting of harsh words, man has created euphemisms, which can presumably serve as hallmarks of civilization. Very often euphemisms can be utilized to avoid embarrassing situation and thus to protect individuals' feelings. This paper is intended to explore how people use euphemisms in daily life in the two largest English-speaking countries.

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### 1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, one of the greatest changes in modern English, especially American English, is the "Return to euphemism" (Swales, J. 1993:47/4). In the early 1580s, the English writer George Blunt initiated the word "euphemism" and defined it as "a good or favorable interpretation".

The word "euphemism" originated from Greek. the prefix "eu-" means "good, well", the root "pheme" means "speak" and the suffix "-ism" means "showing qualities typical of ". So its literal meaning is that "speaking well of ...", "good speech" or "words of good omen". Originally, when ancient Greek offered sacrifices to gods, people always used words of good omen, namely euphemism. Nowadays the category of euphemism not only includes the traditional forbidden, supernatural, nudity, excretions, sex, reproduction, disease, death, but also refers to every sensitive field of modern life, such as race, gender, professional title, money, politics, war, ecology and so on. So in a general sense, all the implicit and roundabout words that are used to express the taboo and sensitive things belong to euphemism.

This paper attempts to concentrate on the euphemisms in daily life.

### 2. Euphemisms on Death

Death is the biggest dread to human beings, so it is a big forbidden zone of the language all through the ages. When referring to death, the English nations always try their best to express it more tactful and light, therefore this kind of language is often called "graveside humor".

In the time of Elizabeth I, people seemed to face death unflinchingly. In fact, their purpose is just to console themselves. "To die is to sleep, and no more" in W. Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet* is a good example. When Elizabeth I hanged Sir Walter Raleigh, she just let him "short by a head" and said humorously: "Our ancestors had to learn to live in close proximity with death; they almost looked upon him as a friend and ...expected him to take banter in good part. " When the Industry Revolution came, the former euphemism seemed to change into fixed sayings gradually. For example, sad bereavement, merciful release, Time, the Great Healer and so on.

There are various kinds of euphemisms concerning with death in almost all forms of trades and professions.

#### 2.1 Religious Euphemisms

Britain and America are the countries where people believe in Christianity. the influence of religion is of a long history and a large range; there is no exception to the language. There are many things, which refer to death in Bible and anthems, among which are a large number of gentle words created elaborately to show respect to the god and the people who passed away. Later this kind of sayings becomes very popular. Of course, as the time goes by, the religious color of some euphemisms has faded away, or even completely disappeared. For example,

May he, she or they **rest in peace!**

A fever, which, in a few days, **brought**, Sir Everhard **to his long home...**

All the doctors in Christendom...can not save him, he **is called.**

## 2.2 Military and Hospital Euphemisms

War is cruel and death is inevitable. the duty of the doctors is to heal the wounded and to rescue the dying, but the disease beyond cure is a common occurrence. At all times and in all countries, the people who have dealings with “death”, not only the policemen, the soldiers and the robbers engaged in killing people, but also the doctors and the nurses engaged in saving people, avoid the word “death” in order not to cause disgust and dread. So these professions are the hotbed of death euphemism. For example,

Squire and Gray fired again...Two had **bit the dust**, one had fled...

Be ready to **lay down** fortune, freedom, and perhaps life itself...

He has **stepped off** the deep end.

The patient **is not doing well**.

## 2.3 Maritime Euphemisms

The English linguist Logan Pearsall Smith thinks that most parts of the metaphors and idioms produced by the masses come from the common people’s professions and hobbies. Britain is an island country and is famous for navigation, so there are many vivid nautical terms passing through the hall into the inner chamber sooner or later. They are not only accepted by the nobles, but also favored by the common people. They finally become a part of the whole people’s vocabulary. For example, “What port are you to sail to?” “For the port of **Davy Jones’ Locker**, my son,” replied the captain.

He was dreadfully frightened at the prospect of **slipping his cable** in a foreign land.

## 3. Euphemisms on Bathroom

Bathroom is one of the most deep-rooted language forbidden zones in society. Because the place, which deals with secretions and excretions, is bathroom, generally, only in this hidden place people can expose his own secret body to drain and clean. So bathroom became a mysterious and disgusting place. Naturally, it became the place of the origin of producing euphemism. As a matter of fact, the word bathroom itself is a euphemism.

Whenever people mention “toilet”, they immediately recall the word “W.C.”. A W. C. is a water closet or toilet, especially one in which the bowl is mechanically flushed with water. W. C. has been widely used, but because the

meaning of W. C. is too direct and inelegant, later it was gradually replaced by restroom, lavatory, toilet, power-room and bathroom. As a matter of fact, in modern English-speaking countries, the word W. C. has basically disappeared.

From childhood, even as soon as they become sensible, people know that all the topics which refer to these inferior function of the body must use vague words, for example, “May I be excused?” or “May I go anywhere?” or Number One, Number Two or some other custom sayings “Now then, go and do your business.”

The English public project office had put forward the word “public convenience” or “Gentleman (Gents) and Ladies”. Britain also had used rest room and comfort station. the modern British trend to use the word “loo”, because which has a convenient pronunciation and has no clear class color.

Generally speaking, the English learners should know such euphemisms, especially for the people who live in the English society, otherwise, when the hostess shows you around to see “geography of the house” or asks you if you want to “wash your hands”, and so on, you may be at a loss.

## 4. Conclusion

Euphemism is a kind of language expression form created by people in order to seek the ideal communicational effect in the social communication. Generally speaking, it has three functions. the first function is to avoid stimulating and to give people comfort. the second function is to dispel coarse or vulgar language and to give people elegant language. the last one is to throw away the old and decayed things and to give people new and original ones.

To know and to master euphemism will not only improve your reading abilities, the level of appreciating and using English correctly, but also can understand the social psychology, culture, custom, etc. of the English-speaking countries.

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