

EUPHEMISMS IN MOTION: CULTURAL AND PRAGMATIC PERSPECTIVES IN ENGLISH AND UZBEK

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Annotation:

This article explores the cultural and pragmatic dimensions of euphemisms in English and Uzbek, highlighting their role as linguistic tools for softening taboo or sensitive concepts. Euphemisms reflect the dynamic interplay of language and culture, with English emphasizing social inclusivity and humor, and Uzbek rooted in religious reverence and collectivism. The study analyzes the formation, lifecycle, and societal implications of euphemisms, focusing on processes of degradation and rehabilitation through cross-linguistic comparisons. Grounded in linguistic theories and cultural analysis, the research reveals how euphemisms shape and mirror societal values. The conclusion emphasizes the transient nature of euphemisms and their significance in navigating social sensitivities, offering rich opportunities for further linguistic and cultural research.

Keywords: Euphemism, linguistic evolution, cultural context, pragmatic function, euphemism treadmill, semantic shift, English language, Uzbek language, cross-cultural comparison, social norms, inclusivity, religious reverence, degradation, rehabilitation, societal values.

Introduction

Euphemisms, as linguistic devices, serve to cloak sensitive or taboo concepts in more socially acceptable terms, facilitating communication while adhering to cultural norms and values. These verbal substitutes are not static; they evolve in response to shifting societal attitudes, reflecting the dynamic interplay between language and culture. In English and Uzbek, euphemisms embody distinct cultural priorities, shaped by secular inclusivity and humor in the former, and religious reverence and collectivism in the latter. This article explores the cultural and pragmatic dimensions of euphemisms in these two languages, examining their formation, life-cycle, and societal implications. By analyzing examples of euphemism degradation and rehabilitation, we highlight how these linguistic phenomena mirror and influence cultural values. Drawing on cross-linguistic comparisons and linguistic theories, this study underscores the transient nature of euphemisms and their role in navigating social sensitivities.

The Nature and Function of Euphemisms

Euphemisms are deliberate linguistic choices that replace direct or offensive terms with milder alternatives, aiming to mitigate discomfort or uphold social decorum. They are deeply embedded in the cultural and pragmatic contexts of a language, serving as tools for politeness, empathy, and social cohesion.

Defining Characteristics

Pragmatic Role: Euphemisms facilitate communication by softening harsh realities, ensuring conversations align with social expectations. For example, in English, “let go” replaces “fired” to reduce the emotional sting of job loss, while in Uzbek, “ko‘z yumdi” (lit. “closed eyes”) euphemizes death to convey respect.

Cultural Embeddedness: Euphemisms reflect cultural values, such as inclusivity in English or religious piety in Uzbek, shaping their acceptability and usage.

Dynamic Evolution: As societal norms change, euphemisms undergo semantic shifts, either losing their softening effect or gaining new connotations, necessitating constant renewal.

Euphemisms operate within a cyclical process, often described as a “treadmill” by linguists Keith Allan and Kate Burridge (2006), where terms transition from polite substitutes to taboo or neutral expressions. This cycle is driven by cultural shifts, as words gain or lose acceptability based on their association with sensitive topics. For instance, the English term “undertaker,” once a euphemism for a funeral director, has been largely replaced by “funeral director” due to its morbid connotations, while in Uzbek, “marhum” (lit. “the blessed”) remains a stable euphemism for the deceased, rooted in Islamic reverence.

The formation and use of euphemisms are profoundly influenced by the cultural and pragmatic contexts of a language, which dictate their tone, intent, and evolution. English and Uzbek provide contrasting case studies, reflecting their distinct societal values.

English: Secular Inclusivity and Playful Expression

English euphemisms are shaped by a secular, individualistic culture that prioritizes social inclusivity, political correctness, and, at times, playful expression. Terms like “visually impaired” (for blind) and “underprivileged” (for poor) exemplify a commitment to reducing stigma and fostering equality (Holder, 2008). These euphemisms align with modern English values of sensitivity toward marginalized groups, aiming to promote dignity and respect. Additionally, humor plays a significant role in English euphemisms, particularly for serious topics like death. Phrases such as “pushing up daisies” or “biting the dust” inject levity, reflecting English’s pragmatic flexibility in adapting language to diverse social contexts (Rawson, 1981). This humor contrasts with the more solemn tone of Uzbek euphemisms, highlighting a cultural preference for lightening serious topics through linguistic creativity.

Example: The euphemism “downsizing” for layoffs in corporate contexts softens the harsh reality of job loss, emphasizing organizational efficiency over personal hardship. Its widespread use in business discourse reflects English’s focus on maintaining professional decorum (Burridge, 2012).

In contrast, Uzbek euphemisms are deeply rooted in Islamic values, collectivist norms, and a cultural emphasis on respect and modesty. Phrases like “ko‘z yumdi” (closed eyes) and “marhum bo‘ldi” (became blessed) frame death within a spiritual context, invoking divine mercy and aligning with Islamic beliefs about the afterlife (Navoiy, 1991). Similarly, euphemisms like “nogironlik” (disability) replaced by “imkoniyati cheklangan kishi” (person with limited possibilities) prioritize empathy and social harmony, reflecting Uzbek’s collectivist ethos. The pragmatic function of Uzbek euphemisms is to uphold moral integrity and communal respect, often prioritizing indirectness over clarity to maintain social cohesion (Safarov, 2008).

Example: The phrase “ko‘z yumdi” is commonly used in both spoken and literary Uzbek, such as in Alisher Navoiy’s Xamsa, to euphemize death. Its spiritual connotation softens the finality of death, reinforcing cultural values of reverence and communal mourning.

While both English and Uzbek employ euphemisms to navigate sensitive topics, their approaches diverge significantly:

Religious vs. Secular Orientation: Uzbek euphemisms are predominantly religious, grounded in Islamic theology, as seen in “marhum bo‘ldi.” English euphemisms, while occasionally

religious (e.g., “at peace”), are more secular, focusing on social sensitivity, as in “visually impaired” (Allan & Burridge, 2006).

Respect vs. Inclusivity: Uzbek prioritizes respect and moral sensitivity, emphasizing communal values, while English focuses on inclusivity and political correctness, reflecting individualistic concerns for equality (Holder, 2008).

Humor vs. Solemnity: English often uses humor to lighten taboo topics (e.g., “pushing up daisies”), whereas Uzbek maintains a solemn, respectful tone, as seen in “ko‘z yumdi,” reflecting cultural differences in addressing sensitive issues (Rawson, 1981). These differences underscore the role of cultural context in shaping euphemistic language, with English favoring flexibility and Uzbek emphasizing tradition and piety.

Euphemisms are inherently transient, subject to processes of degradation and rehabilitation as they navigate the linguistic landscape. This section examines how euphemisms lose their politeness, become taboo, or regain respectability, with examples from English and Uzbek.

Degradation: When Euphemisms Become Taboo

Euphemism degradation occurs when a term becomes too closely associated with the taboo concept it describes, adopting its negative connotations. This phenomenon, often termed the “euphemism treadmill,” necessitates the creation of new euphemisms to maintain politeness (Allan & Burridge, 1991).

English Example: Lavatory

Original Use: In early modern English, “lavatory” (from Latin lavare, to wash) was a euphemism for a place to relieve oneself, avoiding cruder terms like “privy” (Rawson, 1981).

Degradation: Over time, “lavatory” became directly associated with the act of excretion, losing its euphemistic veil. This led to new euphemisms like “restroom” or “bathroom,” which continue the cycle of softening (Holder, 2008).

Analysis: The degradation of “lavatory” illustrates the instability of euphemisms, as their association with a taboo act erodes their politeness, reflecting the dynamic nature of English lexical conventions.

Original Use: The term “kasallik” (illness) was historically used as a neutral descriptor for various health conditions, often in place of more specific or stigmatizing terms (Safarov, 2008).

Degradation: In contemporary Uzbek, “kasallik” can carry a negative connotation in certain contexts, particularly when referring to chronic or stigmatized conditions, prompting the use of “salomatlik muammosi” (health issue) as a more empathetic euphemism.

Analysis: This shift highlights Uzbek’s cultural sensitivity to health-related stigma, with new euphemisms emerging to maintain respect and avoid judgment, aligning with collectivist values.

Rehabilitation: Restoring Respectability

Some euphemisms, after losing favor, regain respectability through semantic shifts or cultural reappropriation, becoming neutral or positive terms. This process reflects broader societal changes in attitudes and values.

Original Use: In medieval English, “lady” was occasionally used as a euphemism for a mistress or woman of questionable repute, as seen in certain literary contexts (Schulz, 1975).

Rehabilitation: Over time, “lady” shed its dubious connotations, becoming the standard, respectful term for an adult female, synonymous with refinement and dignity (Holder, 2008).

Analysis: The rehabilitation of “lady” reflects evolving gender norms in English-speaking societies, where terms associated with women have been redefined to emphasize respect and equality.

Original Use: In earlier Uzbek, “ayol” (woman) sometimes served as a euphemism for a concubine or mistress in specific historical contexts, carrying a slightly ambiguous connotation (Navoiy, 1991).

Rehabilitation: Today, “ayol” is the standard, neutral term for a woman, widely used in both formal and informal settings to denote respect and dignity (Safarov, 2008).

Analysis: The transformation of “ayol” underscores Uzbek’s cultural emphasis on family and gender respect, with the term’s rehabilitation aligning with societal values of modesty and honor.

Societal Implications of Euphemisms

Euphemisms are more than linguistic tools; they reflect and shape societal values, attitudes, and power dynamics, with significant implications for communication and cultural identity. Euphemisms reinforce social norms by defining acceptable ways to discuss sensitive topics. In English, terms like “ethnic minority” (for racial groups) and “mature adult” (for elderly) promote inclusivity and respect, aligning with values of equality and dignity (Burridge, 2012). In Uzbek, euphemisms such as “marhum bo‘ldi” and “salomatlik muammosi” uphold Islamic reverence and communal empathy, reinforcing cultural expectations of modesty and compassion (Safarov, 2008). By dictating polite discourse, euphemisms guide social interactions and maintain cultural standards.

Euphemisms can serve as instruments of power, softening harsh realities to maintain social order or obscure contentious issues. The English term “collateral damage,” used to describe civilian casualties in military operations, minimizes the human cost of conflict, reflecting institutional efforts to manage public perception (Allan & Burridge, 2006). In Uzbek, euphemisms like “ko‘z yumdi” for death comfort mourners while reinforcing religious authority by framing mortality within an Islamic narrative, illustrating the interplay of language and power (Navoiy, 1991).

Euphemisms act as both preservers and agents of cultural change. In Uzbek, the persistence of religious euphemisms like “marhum bo‘ldi” preserves Islamic values amidst modernization, ensuring cultural continuity (Safarov, 2008). In English, the adoption of inclusive euphemisms like “visually impaired” drives cultural change by promoting social justice and sensitivity, reflecting evolving societal priorities (Holder, 2008). However, the constant need for new euphemisms highlights the fragility of linguistic norms, as terms struggle to keep pace with changing sensibilities.

Despite their utility, euphemisms face several challenges that limit their effectiveness and longevity.

The “euphemism treadmill” describes the process whereby euphemisms lose their politeness as they become tainted by the taboo concepts they describe, necessitating new terms (Allan & Burridge, 1991). In English, “crippled” was once a polite euphemism for physical disability but is now offensive, replaced by “mobility impaired.” In Uzbek, “kasallik” has been supplemented by “salomatlik muammosi” in some contexts to avoid negative connotations, illustrating the ongoing need for linguistic renewal (Safarov, 2008).

Euphemisms are highly culture-specific, posing risks of misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication. The English euphemism “pushing up daisies” may seem flippant to Uzbek speakers, who associate death with solemn expressions like “ko‘z yumdi” (Burridge, 2012).

Conversely, the Uzbek phrase “marhum bo‘ldi” may appear overly religious to English speakers accustomed to secular terms like “passed on,” highlighting the need for cultural awareness in translation and interaction (Safarov, 2008).

Euphemisms can introduce ambiguity, complicating communication by obscuring precise meanings. In English, “restructuring” for layoffs may confuse employees about the severity of organizational changes (Holder, 2008). In Uzbek, the broad term “salomatlik muammosi” for illness may require contextual clarification to convey specific health conditions, potentially leading to misinterpretation (Safarov, 2008).

The study of euphemisms offers significant opportunities for linguistic and cultural research, particularly in the context of globalization and digital communication. Future directions include:

Cross-Linguistic Studies: Comparative analyses of euphemisms in languages like English and Uzbek can enhance understanding of cultural influences on language, informing effective translation and intercultural communication strategies (Allan & Burridge, 2006).

Digital Discourse: The emergence of digital euphemisms, such as “unalived” for suicide on English social media platforms, reflects content moderation policies and warrants exploration to understand how digital environments shape language (Burridge, 2012).

Semantic Evolution: Longitudinal studies tracking euphemism lifecycles can provide insights into the relationship between language and societal change, particularly in areas like health and gender discourse (Schulz, 1975).

Pragmatic Functions: Investigating the pragmatic effects of euphemisms in contexts such as health-care, education, or diplomacy can illuminate their role in shaping public perceptions and behaviors (Holder, 2008).

Conclusion

Euphemisms are dynamic linguistic tools that navigate the complex interplay of culture, pragmatics, and societal values. In English, they reflect secular inclusivity and playful expression, while in Uzbek, they embody religious piety and collectivist harmony. Through processes of degradation and rehabilitation, euphemisms reveal the transient nature of language, adapting to cultural shifts while reinforcing social norms. However, challenges such as the treadmill effect, cultural misunderstandings, and semantic ambiguity underscore their limitations. As English and Uzbek societies continue to evolve, euphemisms will remain a vital lens for understanding linguistic and cultural dynamics, offering rich opportunities for research and cross-cultural dialogue. By examining these verbal strategies, we gain deeper insight into how language shapes and is shaped by the values of the communities it serves.

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