

Euphemistic Strategies Used by Iranian BA Students of English Translation to Translate Taboo Words in Newspaper Texts

Parvin Javedsokhan¹

Abstract

Euphemism is a literary strategy used by communicators to reduce the impact of taboo words and maintain public images in communication. While translators strive to translate the taboo words as accurately as possible, euphemistic strategies are sometimes overlooked. This study investigated how Iranian English Translation students deal with some taboo words and the euphemistic strategies used by them to translate. Warren's euphemism model were used as the analytical model leading the study. To conduct the study, 50 female university BA students were randomly selected. The data were collected through copies of a questionnaire and after that analyzed. It was found that

¹ . Department of English, Faculty of Basic Sciences and Modern Technology, Islamic Azad University, E-Campus, Tehran, Iran.

"particularization", "implication", "overstatement", "understatement", "reversal", and "figurative expression" were the most mostly used euphemistic strategies to translate taboo words in newspaper texts among the participants. Findings revealed that euphemistic strategies may reflect cultural values.

Keywords: Euphemistic Strategies, Literary Strategy, Translation, Taboo, and Culture

Introduction

Language as a signs system is continuously constructed, developed, and modified over time. In sociolinguistic insights, language acts as a complex means of communication in human societies. Language and society have complex and mutual relationship with each other. As societies grow, so do languages. In the process of translation, culture is one of the issues that cause many problems for the translator, especially when the source and the target text belong to different cultures and when some concepts exist in both cultures, but have different expressive meanings. Differences in expressive meanings are more difficult to handle when the equivalent in the target culture is more emotionally loaded than the source language item. According to Baker (1992), homosexuality is not derogatory in English, but its equivalent in another language is derogatory, and it would be difficult to use it in a neutral way without showing strong opposition. Some types of language are

prohibited and several words are trivial and taboo. (Tal, 2003). Language users can optionally choose different words and phrases by language. As Wafi (1983) declares, selection of the words are so crucial in preserving communication and language users should be polite, respectful, and somehow impressive to communicate with people .

People tend to use different languages in different societies depending on the situations. (Allan & Burridge, 2006). People like to use polite words in their communications (Linfoot-Ham, 2005). Burchfield (1985) believes that “a language without euphemisms would be a defective instrument of communication” (p. 23). In like manner, Leech (1974) considers euphemisms as the “linguistic equivalent of disinfectant” (p. 53). As Linfoot-Ham (2005) declares, euphemistic strategies are linguistic devices that people instinctively include in their communications and they are used to discuss about taboo subjects, psychologically relieve pressure, and maintain a certain level of politeness so they are socially required. Crystal (1992) states some main reasons to use euphemisms by people: (a) maintain public face; b) Avoid menacing the social face; (c) expressing offensive subjects again; (d) explain unfavorable experiments; (e) Avoid direct mention of objectionable matters. f) prevent disclosing secrets. and (g) occasionally amuse interlocutors.

Since translators are not allowed to transfer any concept or phrase to their own language and culture, the strategies used by translators are very important and vital. Looking at euphemistic as a global phenomenon, this study goals to survey the euphemistic strategies used by Iranian language users. In doing so, some students of

English Translation are considered to Translate Taboo Words in some newspaper texts. Euphemisms model of Warren (1992) guides the analysis of data collected from the newspaper texts. To conclude this introduction, it can be said that, translators always use euphemism to translate sensitive phrases in the source texts (Gross 2012). So euphemizing is a strategy adopted by translators to produce a culturally appropriate text that does not violate face-work conventions.

Review of Literature

Euphemism is taken from Greek and etymologically, the meanings of prefix eu, the root phemi, and the suffix ism are well, speech and result respectively. Therefore, the meaning of euphemism is write or speak well about something (McArthur, 1992). In Hutchinson's encyclopedia (1990), euphemism is described as good speech. Many researchers define euphemism as a device by which offensive or objectionable subjects are replaced by indirect or milder sentences. (Kany, 1960; Diebold, 1961; Williams, 1975; Willis & Klammer, 1981; Fromkin & Rodman, 1993; Abrantes, 2005; Fernández, 2006; Gomez, 2009). Correspondingly, Williams (1975) defines euphemism as a form of language improvement that looks for to find socially allowable terms for notions that may seem awkward.

Anyway all definitions of euphemism express that it is a phrase used to weaken the unpleasantness of a sentence. Brown and Levinson (1987) propose that "face" and "public image" concepts are important in making euphemisms. As Wardhaugh (2006) states, euphemism is used by people to maintain the face or public image of their interlocutors. Ham (2005) describes that the main function of using euphemistic expressions is to save the communicator's face from possible aggression against each other, caused by bringing up a taboo subject that one of them may be sensitive to. Bowers and Pleydell-Pearce (2011) mention that language users protect both their own face and the face of others by using euphemistic. Tal (2003) individuates two kinds of euphemisms according to the psychological impacts. Reinforcing euphemisms that make people feel they are very great; and minifying euphemisms that establish the potent sense of dislike.

If the translator subjects himself/ herself to the strategies realized in the source culture, a proper translation will be obtained. If the strategies of the target culture are dominant, the translation will be acceptable. Freude (1950, p. 18) states that "taboo is a Polynesian word and it is hard for us to find a translation for it. He also notes that the origin of taboo can be attributed to a certain "magical power" and that taboos can be considered "permanent or temporary" (pp. 19-20). He believes that taboo can refer to anything, be it a person or a thing, and also refers to "prohibitions arising from the same attribute" (p. 22). Robinson (1996, p. 24) states that taboos are passed down from generation to generation "at deep unconscious levels of our behavior, through the contagion of somatic response" and never die. Schaffner (2003, p. 23) points to the diverse nature of translation and states

that translation is ideological “since the choice of a source text and the use to which the subsequent target text is put is determined by interests, aims, and objectives of the social agents”.

According to Fershtman et al. (2011), taboo is a type of "thought police" that governs behavior and thoughts of human and even a society's cultural values are indicators of tabooed subjects. Van Oudenhoven et al. (2008) lead a study on euphemisms in 11 various societies. All of participants were asked to write offensive terms that they use in specific contexts. The findings show that each society has its own euphemisms due to cultural differences. Guo (2010) in a contrasting study of Chinese and English euphemisms states that the use of euphemistic sentences is actually linguistic and cultural phenomenon. Bakhtiar (2012) in his study of the communicative functions of expressions in the Persian language describes that euphemisms are divided into three categories in Persian. Firstly, euphemistic sentences are used to avoid offending the public image of the speaker and the listener. Secondly, they are indicators used in convenient contexts. Thirdly, they are engaged by powerful people to impose their thoughts on them.

Badakhshan and Mousavi (2014) recommend the following main tools for structure of euphemisms in Persian language: loan words, ambiguous words, deictic expressions, irony, semantic widening, inversion, circumlocution , understatement, exaggeration, omission, repetition, implication and metaphor. Warren (1992) claims that, when language users perceive respectful words or phrases to convey a sensitive matter, this communication becomes euphemisms. And she considers three prerequisites for this

definition, which include the sensitivity of the subject, its indirectness, and the awareness of communicator that language user is forced to use the phrase due to offensiveness of the subject. As Warren (1992) states, euphemisms may be made in four ways. Firstly, word building tools such as compounding, acronyms, blends, derivations, and onomatopoeia can be used to make euphemistic sentences. Borrowing is the second way of using euphemisms. phonological modification is the Third way to interpret offensive sentences. And creating a new sense for existing words is the fourth way to shape euphemisms. The most commonly euphemized sentences are derived from the fourth way.

Allan and Burrige (1991) suggest other less common tools such as omission, circumlocution, fuzzy words, part to whole, and reduplication. Euphemisms derived from semantic innovation include particulation, implications, metaphors, metonyms, reversals, understatements, and overstatements. Among them particulation is the most common tool used to create euphemisms. According to Warren (1992) and Allan and Burrige (1991), metaphors are flexible tools that rely on human imagination. For the purpose of this study, some English translation students were asked to translate some taboo words and Warren's (1992) euphemisms model guides the analysis of the data collected. The semantic innovation branch of this assortment is of the greatest interest in this study.

Method

Design

This study uses the euphemisms model of Warren (1992) to analyze samples of newspaper texts contain taboo words. The study integrated quantitative and qualitative research designs and paradigmatic particularity (see Dörnyei, 2007).

Participants

The participants were 50 Iranian BA students of English language translation. 50 female students were randomly selected from Islamic Azad University of Tehran. The age of the participants was 20 to 30 years.

Instrumentation

An open-ended questionnaire was designed to collect data for analysis. It consisted of two sections. In the first part, the students were asked to provide relevant demographic information (age, education level) and in the second part, they were asked to translate some newspaper texts that revolved some tabooed topics. According to Abrantes (2005), the selected topics are related to social and cultural taboos. To check the face validity of the questionnaire, two experts in language translation from the Islamic Azad University of

Tehran were asked to check the items and give feedback on their appropriateness.

Data Analysis Procedure

After the participants were chosen, the questionnaires were distributed among them. They were asked to translate each newspaper text within one hour. The unit of analysis consists of a word or phrase that contains a taboo for an entire sentence. Two language experts from the Islamic Azad University of Tehran classified the responses of the participants, according to Warren's euphemism model. Among all the collected texts, the researchers reduced the data to 30 topics to sort only the topics that were more common in the Iranian society. Finally, frequency and percentage statistics were calculated to find the most popular strategies among female students of English translation.

Findings and Results

This study dependent on Warren's (1992) model of euphemisms. Euphemistic strategies that could change the meanings of words and sentences are called semantic innovations. As Allen and Burridge (1991) and Warren (1992) claim, euphemistic sentences resulting from semantic innovations can be classified into six kinds: particularization, figurative expressions, overstatement, understatement, implication, and reversal.

The findings of the current study presented the frequencies and kinds of euphemistic strategies used by female Iranian English translation students to translate taboo words.

Sometimes taboo words are written with an asterisk so as not to offend. Questions

and problems that were once taboo are now openly discussed. The translation process includes two main steps: 1- understanding the message in the source language and 2- reproducing the message in the target language. There are some rude, obscene and taboo words in newspaper texts. This study found that English translation students tried to use euphemisms when they encountered language in the source text that was considered rude or inappropriate in the target culture.

In some cases, there were no direct, but implicit references to topics that might be considered inappropriate for target language audiences. In every society, translation is likely to contain ideas that come from other languages. Hence, based on the fact that foreign texts do not always match the social and cultural norms of the target text, translators try to manipulate literary works in an ideological framework to benefit their own culture. All people from all societies use euphemistic strategies to conceal taboo words and to prevent directly expressing opinions about those words (Chu, 2009). The concept of euphemistic strategies and translation as a strategic activity in Iran has been less researched. The present research tried to identify and discover the euphemistic strategies and find the influence of using strategies on the translation of forbidden words and concepts in newspaper texts in the translation from English to Farsi by Persian translation students.

Table 1 lists some English newspaper texts with their Persian translations, which were

translated by Persian BA students of English translation who try to avoid strong and offensive words such as dorugh (lie), marg (death), alkol (alcohol) and etc in their translations.

Table 1. Some Taboo Words in Newspaper Texts Translated by Persian BA Students of English Translation by Using Euphemistic Strategies

Source Text/ Newspaper Text	Target Text/ Translation
Mary discouraged by asking her "age".	Maryam baa porsidan sen o saalash e'temad be nafsash raa az dast daad.
The butcher is selling "pork".	Aan ghassaab gousht haraam miforushad.
If a person is "drunk", may not has the mental capacity to make a fully informed decision.	Shakhsi ke makhmour ast, tavaanaaei zehni baraaye tasmim giri kaamelan aagaahaaneh nadaarad.
Now people will think that you've been "raped".	Aknoun mardom tasavvor khaahand kard ke be shoma ta'addi shodeh ast.

You are not
to "smoke" here.

Inja este'mal dokhaniaat
mamnou'a ast.

**She has a history
of "mental illness".**

U saabegheye naakhosh
ahvaali rouhi daarad.

No one escape "death"!

Baazgasht hameh be souye
ust!

**Those couple wait to have
"sex" until marriage.**

Aan zoj taa zamaan ezdevaj
yekdigar raa lams
nakhaahand kard.

How could I "lie" to you?!

Chegouneh mitavaanam
haghighat raa be to
nagouyam?!

**Do you have "alcohol"-
free drinks?**

Aayaa noushidani halaal
daarid?

**It is weird to "date a man a
lot younger than you".**

Gharaar gozaashtan baa
mardi ke faaseleh senni
baalaaei baa shomaa
daarad, gheir ma'amoul ast.

Table 2 shows frequencies of euphemistic strategies among the Persian students of English translation. They fell under three main categories: particularization (30%),

implication (22.5%), and overstatement (18.75%). As shown in Table 2, most of the euphemistic sentences belonged to the particularization, a strategy that refers to choosing a specific term for an offensive expression (e.g. Baazgasht hameh be souye ust! [No one escape death!]) and implication strategies. Implication is a strategy that is the result of a causal relationship between the context and situation in which it is used. Overstatement, a strategy used to exaggerate an event, (e.g. Maryam baa porsidan sen o saalash e'temad be nafsash raa az dast daad [Mary discouraged by asking her "age".]) was the next most frequently used strategy.

Understatement, a strategy used to undermine the importance of sentences (e.g. Aknoun mardom tasavvor khaahand kard ke be shoma ta'addi shodeh ast. [Now people will think that you've been "raped".]) , and reversal, a strategy that refers to using the opposite meaning of something impolite (e.g. Chegouneh mitavaanam haghghat raa be to nagouyam?! [How could I "lie" to you?!]) were the last euphemistic strategies used by the Persian students of English translation. They showed 11 responses (13.75%) and 10 sentences (12.5%) respectively. Figurative expression is a word or phrase that have meaning but are not literally true. This strategy was so inconsiderable to be mentioned.

Table 2. Frequencies of Euphemistic Strategies used by the Persian students of English translation to translate taboo words

Strategy	Number	Percentage
Understatement	11	13.75%
Overstatement	15	18.75%
Reversal	10	12.5%
Figurative Expression	2	2.5%
Particularization	24	30%
Implication	18	22.5%
Total	80	100%

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to identify, describe and discover the euphemistic strategies used by Persian BA students of English translation to translate taboo words in newspaper texts. To achieve this goal, this study used Warren's (1992) euphemism model. After collecting data through open-ended questionnaires and then analysis, it was found

that Persian students of English translation used three euphemistic strategies more than the others (particularization, implication, and overstatement) (see Table 2 above).

The findings were compatible to the observations of Greene (2000) and Rabab'ah & A-Qarani (2012) who found it offensive to use death, lie, alcohol, and some other taboo words in their translations. Also they used the same euphemistic strategies to translate taboo words. The study, however, revealed results which were in clash with those of other studies. For instance, Greene (2000), Frajzyngier and Jirsa (2006), who observed that overstatement and figurative expressions were the most frequently used euphemistic strategies in translating taboo words.

Conclusion

Based on the euphemism model, this study investigated the pragmatic aspects of using euphemistic strategies in the translation of taboo words. Some words like alcohol, sex, smoke, pork, rape, mental illness, death, lie, and etc are taboo words. Taboo words should be changed in order to make them fit the target language values and beliefs. Through the implementation of this study and comparing the findings with other studies (Greene, 2000; Frajzyngier and Jirsa, 2006; Rabab'ah and A-Qarani, 2012), it was found that euphemism is a linguistic phenomenon and cultural concept. Because of the cultural differences, different people have different attitudes towards a taboo topic.

The findings of the present study showed that Persian English translation students use different euphemistic strategies due to cultural and social differences. Thus, as Fernandez (2006) claims, euphemism is a natural phenomenon that exists in all natural languages. Persian English translation students use euphemized phrases in different fields to have great translations. According to Allan and Burridge (2006), people use euphemisms for two purposes. First, they use euphemistic sentences to prevent the spread of taboos in their culture. Second, they use various euphemistic strategies to trivialize the violent level of some taboo subjects. Finally, euphemisms exist in Persian culture, but they differ from other cultures depending on social norms and values.

Further studies could exert the methodology used in this study, but include a wider range of data to confidently generalize the findings. In addition, since Iran is a polyethical country, increasing the number of English translation students from different fields can also help to discover euphemized regional phrases.

References

Abrantes, A. M. (2005). Euphemism and co-operation in discourse. In E. Grillo (Ed.), *Power Without Domination, Dialogism and the Empowering Property of Communication* (pp. 85–103). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Allan, K., & Burridge, K. (1991). *Euphemism and dysphemism: Language used as a shield and weapon*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Allan, K., & Burridge, K. (2006). *Forbidden words: taboo and the censoring of language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Badakhshan, E., & Mousavi, S. (2014). A linguistic analysis of euphemism in Persian. *Language Related Research*, 5(1).1-26.

Baker, M (1992) *In Other Words*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bakhtiar, M. (2012). Communicative functions of euphemisms in Persian. *The Journal in International Social Research*, 5(20), 7-12.

Bowers, J. S., & Pleydell-Pearce, C.W. (2011). Swearing, euphemisms, and linguistic relativity. PLoS ONE 6 (7), e22341, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0022341>.

Brown, P., & Levinson, S.C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Burchfield, R. (1985). An outline history of euphemisms in English. In D. J. Enright (Ed.), *Fair*

of Speech: The Uses of Euphemisms. (pp. 13-31). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chu, M. P. (2009). Chinese cultural taboos that affect their language and behavior choices. *Asian culture and history*, 1(2), 122-139.

Crystal, D. (1992). *The Cambridge encyclopedia of language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Diebold, A. R. (1961). American-Spanish euphemisms by Charles E. Kany. *Book Review* 37(2), 289-292.

Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fernández, E. C. (2006). The language of death: Euphemism and conceptual metaphorization in Victorian obituaries. *Sky Journal of Linguistics*, 19, 101- 131.

Fershtman, C., Gneezy, U., & Hoffman, M. (2011). Taboos and identity: considering the unthinkable. *American Economic Journal: Microeconomics* 139–164, Retrieved on November 20, 2011 from: <http://rady.ucsd.edu/faculty/directory/gneezy/docs/taboo.pdf>.

Frajzyngier, Z., & Jirsa, B. (2006). The principle of indirect means in language use and language structure. *Journal of Pragmatics* 38, 513–542.

Freud, S. (1950). *Totem and taboo: Some points of agreement between the mental lives of savages and neurotics*. James Strachey (trans.), (1950). London: Routledge.

Fromkin, V., & Rodam, R. (1993). *An introduction to language*. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers.

Gómez, M. (2009). Towards a new approach to the linguistic definition of euphemism. *Language Sciences* 31(6), 725–739.

Greene, C. T. (2000). *The use of euphemisms and taboo terms by young speakers of Russian and English*. Unpublished M.A. Thesis. University of Alberta.

Gross, C. (2012). Embarrassed by the Bible: What's a Translator to Do? *The Bible Translator*, 87-94.

Ham, K. (2005). The linguistics of euphemism: A diachronic study of euphemism formation. *Journal of Language and Linguistics* 4 (227–263), Retrieved on August 23, 2007 from: http://www.shakespeare.uk.net/journal/4_2/linfoot_ham.htm.

Kany, C. E. (1960). *American-Spanish euphemisms*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Leech, G. (1974). *Semantics*. Penguin

Linfoot-Ham, K. (2005). The linguistics of euphemism: A diachronic study of euphemism formation. *Journal of Language and Linguistics* 4(2), 227-263.

McArthur, T. (1992). *The Oxford companion of the English language*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Rabab'ah, G., & Al-Qarni, A. M. (2012). Euphemism in Saudi Arabic and British English. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 44(6), 730-743.

Robinson, D. (1996). *Translation and taboo*. Northern Illinois University Press.

Schaffner, C. (2003). Third ways and new cen- ters: Ideological unity or difference. In: Cal-
zada Prez, M. (ed.), *Apropos of ideology: Translation studies on ideology- Ideologies in
translation studies*. London: St. Jerome.

Tal, A. (2003). Euphemisms in the Samaritan Targum of the Pentateuch. *Aramaic Studies* 1, 109–129.

The Hutchinson Encyclopedia (1990). Hodder Arnold.

Van Oudenhoven, J. P., de Raad, B., Francoise, A. L., Boski, P., Brunborg, G.,
Carmona, C., Barelds, D., Hill, C. T., Mla i , B., Motti, F., Rammstedt, B., &
Woods, S. (2008). Terms of abuse as expression and reinforcement of
cultures. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 32, 174–185.

Wafi, A. A. (1983). *Language and society*. Riyadh: Okaz Bookstores Companies.

Wardhaugh, R. (2006). *An introduction to sociolinguistics*. Malden, MA: Blackwell
Publishing.

Warren, B. (1992). What euphemisms tell us about the interpretation of words? *Studia
Lingustica* 46, 128–182.

Williams, J. M. (1975). *Origins of the English language: A social and linguistic history*. New
York: Free Press.

Willis, H., & Klammer, E. (1981). *A brief handbook of English*. New York : Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Author biography

Parvin Javedsokhan holds a master's degree in Translation Studies and currently works as a freelance translator and English teacher. She has translated and published two books into Persian. Her master's research project was focused on the Quality Assessment of Idiomatic Expressions in English-to-Persian Translation. She is quite interested in pursuing her studies at a PhD level in the same field. The author's areas of interest include culture and translation and teaching translation.