A Contrastive Study of Euphemism Between Arabic And English Languages

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Abstract

To communicate effectively with others, one has to choose the appropriate way of expressing his ideas. This study aimed to identify the similarities and differences of euphemism between Arabic and English. The significance of the study was to raise public awareness of how important is to use certain words and phrases instead of other ones in particular situations. This study involved Saudi female college students and it took place in Yanbu Industrial City, Saudi Arabia. A group of 10 EFL female students was asked to answer a questionnaire that indirectly tested their usage of euphemisms in their L1 and L2. The results indicated some similarities between Arabic and English use of euphemism and most importantly at vulnerable settings like talking about death followed by culturally sensitive topics that address health status, social classification, and concepts of politeness. In view of the findings, EFL learners sometimes face difficulty in choosing their language cautiously, responsibly and consciously in cross-cultural contexts where the proper use of euphemism is the cornerstone to avoiding embarrassment and face-threatening acts.

Keywords: Arabic Euphemism, English Euphemism, Contrastive Study

INTRODUCTION

Euphemism, a word or expression used as a substitution to soften the intensity or the force of one that considers impolite, harsh or embarrassing, is both found in Arabic and English languages. The validity of euphemism differs from culture to culture according to the dos and don'ts that speakers do conceive in their languages. While using "jail or prison" instead of the nicer-sounding phrase "correctional facility" in a speaker's language would be sometimes ignored yet acceptable, learning the right usage of euphemism across languages is not an area of tolerance if one's goal is to communicate successfully.

Understanding the similarities and differences in the usage of euphemism between Arabic and English, as this study proposed, will enable speakers of both languages to avoid conflict and misunderstanding in order to maintain more effective communication.

The Study

The purpose of this study is to identify the similarities and differences of euphemism between Arabic and English.

This study attempts to answer the following research question:

- Where is the usage of euphemism most and least important in English and Arabic?

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Barridge (2012), euphemisms are sweet-sounding words, or at least inoffensive, alternatives for expressions that speakers or writers prefer not to use in executing a particular communicative intention on a given occasion.

Mugair (2014) conducted a study about the analyzation of euphemism in comparison between English and Arabic. Both Arabic and English borrowed euphemisms from other languages and both have used it in three figures of speech: metonymy, synecdoche, and circumlocution. Moreover, the study discussed features of political euphemism and dysphemism. The findings showed that 1) euphemism was a universal phenomenon, 2) according to the similarities and differences between Arabic and English the concept of euphemism must be also found among other languages.

Another study was conducted by Al-Qarni and Rabab'ah (2012) about Saudi Arabic and British English euphemism. The study showed the similarities and differences of euphemism in both languages which were mainly influenced by religious beliefs, values, cultural customs, and politeness concepts. The findings revealed that both Saudis and British euphemism's responses had no direct relation to gender, but rather Saudi Arabic females had more ways to express euphemism.

The previous studies and the current study are different in terms of the goal of the proposed question. The answer to the question in this study evolved around raising public awareness of what words or phrases should be used in particular situations instead of other ones.

Arabic Euphemism

Arabic euphemism is composed of three main elements. The first one is the euphemistic expression (المكنى به), the second one is the original expression (المكنى عنه), and the last one is the context of the situation (القرينة).

English Euphemism

English euphemism is used in two senses; sweet talking and deception. On the one hand, sweet-talking euphemism is used to save one's face and to avoid face-threatening acts, but on the other hand, deceptions are used by political, military and nuclear categories to change unspeakable things to tolerable ones by concealing the horrible facts.

METHOD

Participants

The total number of participants in this study was 10 Saudi female EFL students at Yanbu University College (YUC) in Yanbu Industrial City, Saudi Arabia. For all of the students, Arabic was their first language and they aged between 19 and 24 years old.

Data Collection Procedure

Students were asked to answer a questionnaire. The items of the questionnaire were measured by five-point Likert scales, from 1 showing (Strongly Disagree) to 5 showing (Strongly Agree). The questionnaire was designed in two languages, Arabic and English in order to avoid misinterpretations. The responses of the questionnaire as the research question proposed would: 1) give a measure of where the usage of euphemism is most and least important in Arabic and English.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Given that the main purpose of this study was to identify the similarities and differences of euphemism between Arabic and English, the main part of the analysis was contrastive in nature.

Questionnaire

Table 1. Responses frequencies for questionnaire items

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean response
S1	6	3	1	0	0	4.5
S2	1	4	5	0	0	3.6
S3	0	3	6	1	0	3.2
S4	2	2	1	4	1	3
S5	2	2	3	2	1	3.2
S6	2	3	5	0	0	3.7

The responses in the table above revealed some areas where the usage of Arabic euphemism was similar to English. Talking about death was the most common area of use, followed by culturally sensitive topics like health status, social classification, and concepts of politeness. The analysis provided a general manifesto of the usage of Arabic and English euphemism. As the purpose of the study suggested, the analyzation of euphemism was based on an unspecific indistinctive approach, unlike the previous studies in which the analyzation of euphemism was restricted concerning its use and application to a specific field of a study like semantics or pragmatics and devoted for a category of beneficiaries. However, this study would serve a broader range of beneficiaries where improving communication between cultures is, in fact, of concern to everyone.

CONCLUSION

This contrastive study has aimed to analyze what determines the appropriate usage of euphemism in Arabic and English. Overall, the results have shown that euphemism in both Arabic and English was equally important in sensitive settings. Using euphemism when talking about death was the most sensitive context which called for a cautious approach. As the questionnaire's responses of euphemism concerning death were on their highest scale, alternatively, using euphemism in other culturally sensitive topics was considered least important compared to death.

IMPLICATIONS

In view of the findings, when EFL learners communicate with English native speakers, they might sometimes find it difficult to euphemistically convey their ideas in such culturally sensitive contexts where the proper use of euphemism is needed. Therefore, lack of awareness of how to properly use euphemism can pose major limitations as regard language and cross-cultural communication. Further discussion concerning the factors that may affect the internal structure of the usage of Arabic and English euphemism can be helpful to consider in cross-cultural communication studies.

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