

A Contrastive Study of Using Euphemism in English and Arabic

Jawaher Ali Almufawez

Yanbu University College, Saudi Arabia

Rawabi Majid Alalwani*

Yanbu University College, Saudi Arabia

Hana Altalhi

Yanbu University College, Saudi Arabia

Abstract

This study supplied some insights into cross-cultural distinction realization by analyzing English and Arabic euphemism. It aimed to show different types of euphemism and how it is interpreted differently across cultures. In addition, the analysis was between Saudi dialect and American dialect. The researchers used questionnaire which was posted on the social media and they gave it to their family and friends. The study tried to answer the question: what are the differences and similarities of using euphemism in Saudi Arabia and America and what are the types of euphemism? The result of this study discussed many aspects like: cultural and religious beliefs and values.

Keywords: Contrastive study, Euphemism, English, Arabic

INTRODUCTION

The main purpose of language is to communicate with others. People communicate using many words. These words can affect people's lives, so they have to choose their words carefully. Sometimes, some of them become more polite in their speech to avoid hurting others. Oxford Online Dictionary (2000) defines *polite* as "having or showing behavior that is respectful and considerate of other people." One type of politeness is using a euphemism. This research is a contrastive study between Arabic speakers (Saudi) and English speakers (American). The purpose of this study was to show the similarities and differences in both languages.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this part, there is an overview of the key concepts of the study and the previous studies.

Key concepts

Euphemism: Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (2003) defines *euphemism* as "substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive expression for one that may offend or suggest

something unpleasant." The word "euphemism" is derived from Greek. The prefix "eu-" means "good, well"; the stem "pheme" means "speak"; the suffix "-ism" means "action or result". The word means "speaking well of...", "good speech", and "words of good omen". All societies have their own euphemisms which depend on their cultures. However, there is a term called dysphemism which is the opposite of euphemism. Noman (2013) defines dysphemism as "an expression with connotations that are offensive either about the denotatum or to the audience, or both, and it is substituted for a neutral or euphemistic expression for just that reason." (Dysphemism, Para.1).

English Language: English language is an Indo- European language which is the third most widely used language in the world. It is spoken as a native language by many countries; like: the United States and the United Kingdom. However, some countries deal with it as a foreign or a second language. Immigrants affected American culture which led to affect English language. These effects may change the way of being polite. Cambridge Online Dictionary (1999) defines euphemism in English language as "a word or phrase used to avoid saying an unpleasant or offensive word which pronounced as /'ju:.fə.mi.zəm/."

Arabic Language: Arabic is the most spoken language within the Semitic language group and one of the most widely spoken languages in the world. It is spoken by more than 422 million people. Arabic language was affected by the Islamic religion. Islam asks people to be more polite. For example, {وَقُولُوا لِلنَّاسِ حُسْنًا} "speak fair to the people" (Quran Israa:53, King Fahad edition), and the prophet Mohammad said, "والكلمة الطيبة صدقة" "And the good word is a charity" show how using euphemisms in Arabic language is very common and required by their religion and culture. Noman (2013) said that euphemism in Arabic language known as (luṭf) and its derived from (laṭa:fah) which are to be kind. Euphemism is translated into Arabic as (luṭf atta'bi:r) "kind expression" or (ḥusun atta'bi:r) "nice expression". (Euphemisms, Para2).

Previous Studies

A study was done by Ghaleb Rabab'ah (2012) which had the topic of Euphemism in Saudi Arabic and British English. It had two groups of participants. The first group was Saudi college students which included 75 male and 75 female of (+Secondary Education) level. They were from King Saud University, Faculty of Arts. The second group was British college students which included 75 male and 75 female of (+Secondary Education) level. They were from the University of Hull's, Faculty of Arts. It was a quantitative study since it used two open questionnaires. One was for the Saudi participants, and the other was for the British participants. The participants were asked about their gender and open conversational question about death, lying and bodily functions. The result of this study was no relation between the use of euphemism and gender. Also, the Saudis and the British used taboos for death and lying question, but not for bodily functions. Also, Saudi Arabic had more euphemistic expression than British English.

Another study was conducted by Tailor, A., and Ogden, J. (2009) to examine exploring the relative impact of using the term 'obese' compared to doctors' preferred euphemism on patients' beliefs about the problem. The type of this study considered a quantity the researchers used a cross-sectional survey followed by an experimental study. In the cross-

sectional survey, there were 19 doctors described their preferred use of 'obese' term. In the experimental study, there were 449 patients from West London they completed a set of ratings about their beliefs about the term 'obese' or the doctors' preferred euphemism. The result of that, using the term obese was avoided by doctors. The most commonly used euphemism was 'your weight may be damaging to your health'. Patients, who were not obese, affected by the term obese. However, Patients, who were obese, showed more upsetting from the euphemism word.

Another study was conducted by Sarab Kadir Mugair (n.d) to analyze euphemism and dysphemism in English and Arabic with special reference to political discourse. This study happened at Diyala University, Iraq. The type of this study is quality. Based on some examples, the researcher discussed three features which distinguish political euphemism from others. This distinguish was in pragmatics how political euphemism violates all maxims of Grice's cooperative principle. It was discussed dysphemism and in which way its formation process was similar and different from euphemism. The result of this study was Arabic and English languages couch euphemisms mainly in three figures of speech: metonymy, synecdoche, and circumlocution. In addition, both languages borrowed from other languages as a euphemistic process. Metonymy was the fundamental figure of speech of euphemisms and it was mainly formed in both languages for the sake of euphemisms. English and Arabic euphemisms had more resemblances and fewer distinctions. This showed that euphemism was a universal phenomenon in natural languages and it was expected that most of similarities and differences between English and Arabic may possibly be found among other natural languages.

Finally, a study was conducted by Tawalbeh, A., & Al-Oqaily, E. (2012) to examines the conception of (in)directness and politeness in the speech act of requests among Saudi Arabic native speakers as compared to American English native speakers. The participants of this study were Saudi and American students. They were randomly selected group of thirty male and female. Their ages were between 18 to 24 years old. They were undergraduate students from different areas of specialization. It was a quantitative study since it used a Discourse Completion Test which is a form of a questionnaire. This form of questionnaire give the participants some natural situations which need some reaction. The result of this study was that the American participants used the conventional indirectness strategy most of the time. The directness of the Saudi participants depended on the social variables. Also, the American participants used direct requests with their friends if the request was not weighty. Also, the use of directness showed the relationship among the Saudi student; if they are friends, they would be direct and if not, they would be indirect.

In this research, the participants were chosen randomly in contact to the first study. The previous studies discussed euphemism in specific situations. However, this study discussed it in many situations. Therefore, this study is more useful because it shows readers the importance of euphemism in many aspects. The last study talked about indirectness and the age of the participants was between 18 to 24, but this study talked about euphemism and the age of the participants was between 20 to 60.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The Saudi participants were 20 persons, representing many levels of education. It included 25% male and 75% female. Their ages were between 20 until 60. The American participants were 20 persons, representing many levels of education. It included 50% male and 50% female. Their ages were between 20 until 60.

Instrument

The research tool used in this contrastive study was a questionnaire. A questionnaire was shared among the participants. It was designed by the researchers to gather information about people's speech towards using euphemism in their daily life. The questionnaire contained 9 topics. The researchers designed two versions of questionnaire one in English and the other in Arabic.

Data Collection Procedures

The researchers designed two questionnaires to examine English and Arabic euphemisms. The researchers published the questionnaires among the native speakers in both languages. They gave the questionnaire to their family and friends. Also, they posted it on the social media. After they got more than 300 responses, they analyzed the response by dividing them into two main groups and the two main groups were divided into two sub-groups.

COMPARISON AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

The result of this study was divided into two main groups and each group was divided into two sub-groups according to the responses to the questionnaire. It was divided into the ability to use a euphemism as a phrase or as a phrase with other things, and disability to use euphemism which divided into two groups either the participants used dysphemism kindly, or they used it alone. This table shows the percentages for using euphemisms in both languages.

Table 1. The percentages of using euphemisms in both languages

Topic	Arabic speaker	American speaker
Death	75%	73%
Abortion	77%	72%
Cancer	23%	0%
Brain Death	15%	0%
Faling the Course	54%	64%
Demented	78%	70%
Old Age	73%	37%
Poorness	90%	68%
Inactive	89.5%	86%

The Ability to Use Euphemism

a- Using Euphemism as Word or Phrase:

Cambridge Online Dictionary (1999) defines *euphemism* as "a word or phrase used to avoid saying an unpleasant or offensive word." Therefore, using the euphemism as a word or a phrase is the main type of euphemism.

Examples of using euphemism as a word or a phrase:

1. I'm sorry that I have to give you some sad news but your relative has passed away
2. I have some terrible news for you. I'm so sorry to tell you this, but so-and-so has passed away.
3. You have miscarried
4. You didn't pass
5. Someone cannot afford. he/ she is low on funds right now
6. الله احبه واخذه بجواره "God loved that person, so he took that person next to him"
7. جنينك من اهل الجنة "your fetus is one of the people who will be in the paradise"
8. للأسف بقوله انه قريبك جاله الخبيث " Unfortunately, I will tell him that your relative has the malignant disease"
9. سوف ينام مدة طويلة " he will sleep for a long time"
- 10- صاحبنا يمر بظروف مالية صعبة "Our friend is going through difficult financial circumstances"

Some of these responses were attached to other words or phrases; like: I am sorry or I have some bad/terrible news. Also in Arabic, they used some religious phrases; like الله احبه /Allah ahbuh/ " God loved that person" or هو من اهل الجنة /min 'ahl aljana/ "one of the people who will be in the paradise." In English, the participants used passed away instead of dying, miscarried instead of abortion, did not pass instead of failed and low on funds instead of poor. In Arabic, the participants used الخبيث (the malignant disease) instead of السرطان (cancer), نوم طويل (a long sleep) instead of الموت الدماغى (brain death) and ظروف مالية صعبة (difficult economic conditions) instead of فقير (poor). The researchers noticed that Saudi participants used more than 7 euphemistic expressions for the death topic, but American participants used one euphemistic expression.

Table 2. Euphemistic expressions for the death topic

Topics	Saudi's euphemism	American's euphemism
Death	"he left the world رحل من الدنيا"	Passed away
	الله اخذه بجواره "God took that person next to him"	-
	اختاره الله "God chose him"	-
	الاعمار بيد الله "ages in God's hand "	-

b- Using Euphemism as a Phrase with Other Things (changing situations, giving information or looking for positiveness):

In this part, the participants used the euphemism, but they talked about the positiveness or gave some information to make the bad news more acceptable.

Examples of using euphemism as a phrase with other things:

1. I would say I have bad news for you, probably tell them to sit down and tell them that their relatives has passed away.
2. I would tell her to calm down first and then I would tell her that her relative passed away.
3. I'm afraid that we weren't able to save your fetus but you are young enough and health enough to have more children.
4. I would say hey I saw the grades and unfortunately you did not get a passing grade.
5. I would suggest to my friends that we only ask him to chip in 10 riyals and the rest of us divide the real cost (I would say because so-and-so is on a tight budget).

6.

الدنيا دار معبر وليست مستقر لنا لذلك كل من توفي ذهب لربه الرحيم وكلنا في هذا الطريق لذلك اريد ان اخبرك ان قريبك قد اختاره الله وانتهى موعده في هذه الدنيا فأرجو ان تحتسب الاجر في موته وإنا لله وإن إليه لارجعون "The world is like a road and not a stable for us, so everyone who died went to his merciful Lord. We are all in this way. I want to tell you that your relative has been chosen by God to go out from this world. Ask for reward and We are of God, and to Him we return. "

7. كل شي في هذه الدنيا مكتوب قبل بعثنا لذلك اختار الله جنينك ان ليكون لكي شفيعا يوم القيامة هنيئاً لك واحتسبي الاجر "Every things in life was written before we come. God chose your fetus to be your intercessor at the Day of Judgment. Ask for reward."
8. الله هو المعطي والابخذ، ياخذ ويعطي بحكمه وقد اخذ جنينك لسبب يعلمه هو فيه خير لك ان شاء الله وسيعوضك "God is the giver and taker. He takes and gives for wisdom. He took your fetus for a good reason that he knew. He will compensate you with all the best"
9. "God love this person. He wanted to raise up his position. This person has the malignant disease"
10. "الله يعوضك خير إن شاء الله تعدي الفصول الجايه ماعديت هذا الفصل May Allah reward you with good. You will pass the coming semesters if you do not pass this semester."

In some examples, the participants tried to change the person's position before telling the bad news. For example, if the person was standing the participants would ask him to sit down. Also, the participants gave the person some information before telling him the bad news to have an idea and to be less surprised; like: I saw the grades and unfortunately or "God is the giver and taker"/allah hu almueti walakhidh /. Also, some of the participants told the person about the positive things about this news; like: ليكون لكي "to be your intercessor at the Day of Judgment" / liakun likay shafieana yawm alqiamih/. Moreover, some of the participants gave a solution; like: I would suggest to my friends that we only ask him to chip in 10 riyals and the rest of us divide the real cost.

Disability to Use Euphemism

a- Using Dysphemism Kindly:

As the researchers mentioned in the introduction, dysphemism means using terrible words with polite words to make it more acceptable. That happens because some people do not know the euphemistic words. In this part "Using Dysphemism Kindly" the participants used dysphemism words with some polite words; like: sorry in English and اسف(asif) in Arabic.

Some participants did that because they knew how the dysphemism words are so hard; therefore, they tried to use polite words to make their speech kind. This matter happens in all cultures around the world.

Example of using dysphemism kindly:

1. I'm sorry to inform you about this, but unfortunately the fetus has died.
2. I have some terrible news. I'm sorry to tell you this, but so/and-so has cancer.
3. I have some news that is sad but I'm sorry to inform you that your child/father is clinically brain dead
4. متوفى دماغي مع الاسف " Unfortunately so/and-so is brain dead"
5. للاسف اود اخباركم ان ابنكم ميت دماغيا " Unfortunately I want to tell you that your son is brain dead"

These responses showed how participants, who differ in languages and cultures, started with the same word "sorry" or "asif" to be kind at the beginning in their response then they used the dysphemism words which are written by a bold font. This matter happened because the participants may do not have enough knowledge of their language. Also, these euphemistic words may not be known in their cultures and societies, but they are existed in languages. The table below shows the dysphemism words with the euphemistic words in both languages.

Table 3. Dysphemism words with the euphemism words in both languages

Dysphemism Words	Arabic Euphemism	English Euphemism
Brain dead (mut damaghi)	غيبوبة ghybwb	Coma
Died (mut)	توفي tawafaa	Passed away
Cancer (sartan)	الخبث alkhabith	The malignant disease

It is very difficult to say "brain dead" or " mut damaghi" to the patient's family, but it is less difficult to say "coma" or " ghybwb". It is considered a problem when people do not know the euphemistic words in their first language. Ignorance of euphemistic words may cause many problems for people. It may hurt and bother other. The researchers noticed that, although American participants have euphemistic words for the word cancer, they did not use at all. However, almost all Saudi participants used euphemistic words. That happened because American participants associate *malignant* with a medical purpose.

b- Using Dysphemism Alone

In this part, people used dysphemism words without trying to be kind. This happened for many reasons. It might happen because the participants, who lack kindness word in their life, cannot produce euphemistic words.

Examples of using dysphemism alone:

1. Your family member has died. His body is still alive, but he is no longer here.
2. I would just tell them they failed.
3. I would say that I did not expect him to be so old
4. وديها المستشفى اللي في الطائف "bring her to the hospital which is in Taif"
5. مهمل في دراسه " he is careless"

6. "We did what we should do, but no response. Ages in God's hands and we discovered that the patient is brain dead" سوينا اللي علينا ومافيه استجابته والاعمار بيد الله والمريض اكتشفنا انه ميت دماغيا

The researchers noticed, when the participants used dysphemism words alone, their speeches became stronger and may affected people in a bad way, but it did not mean the participants wanted to be rude. In this respond "wadiha almustashfaa ally fi altayif", it is so difficult to say that for someone who has a demented sister. In addition, this respond showed how the speaker did not care about the topic and s/he only wanted to give a solution. In the Brain Death topic, one of the participants said, "suiuna ally ealayna wamafih aistijabuh wal'iiemar biad allah walmarid aiktashafna 'anah mayit dimaghy." This respond is so hard from the doctor to patient's family. It showed how the doctor told them the bad news without caring about family's feelings. Also, this is not acceptable from doctors because they should be more kind to pass these things to people. Also, the same thing happened with one of the American participants when s/he responded "Your family member has died. His body is still alive, but he is no longer here."

After all, the researchers noticed some important points: First, Saudi speakers used many religious phrases to deliver the bad news; like: saying 'iina lilah wa'an / ان لله وان اليه راجعون "We are of God, and to Him we return." Second, both languages have a euphemism, but one of them used it more the other one. For example, Saudi speakers used a euphemism in topics more than the American speakers and vice versa. Third, when the participants did not have the ability to use a euphemism, Saudi speakers might lie to avoid hurting others. However, the American speakers said the bad news honestly.

The researchers would have a better chance to make this contrastive study deeply, but some of the participants did not answer those topics. They replied many sentences such as:

1. "This matter is so difficult" والله الامر هذا جداً صعب.
2. "No comment" بدون تعليق
3. "I cannot say anything I will wait for him to know from another person" لا استطيع القول سأنتظر الى ان يعلم بنفسه
4. I've never had an experience like this. I do not know how to inform
5. I'm not sure to say that
6. This is hard because I have no experience in the matter.

That showed how some people do not have the ability to use their language when they have to pass bad news; that is considered a big problem. All languages serve and give many euphemistic words that make a speech more acceptable. It is so bad when people are ignorant of euphemistic words in their language. Because of that, they avoided answering those questions.

CONCLUSION

This contrastive study examined some similarities and differences between the Saudi native speakers and the American native speakers. The similarities can be summarized in three points. First, both languages had the ability to use euphemism alone or with polite expressions. Second, if the participants did not have the ability to use a euphemism, they

probably would use dysphemism with polite expressions. Third, both languages often used a euphemism in similar ways. The differences can be summarized in four points. First, Saudi speakers used many religious phrases to deliver the bad news. Second, in some topics, American speakers used a euphemism more than Saudi speakers. Third, if Saudi speakers had a disability to use a euphemism, they would lie to avoid hurting people. Forth, if American speakers had a disability to use a euphemism, they would say the bad news clearly.

REFERENCES

- English language. (n.d.). In Wikipedia. Retrieved December 10, 2017, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_language
- Euphemism. (1999). Cambridge Online Dictionary. Retrieved <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/euphemism?fallbackFrom=british-grammar&q=euphemisms>
- Lugha earabia. (n.d.). In Wikipedia. Retrieved December 10, 2017, https://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D9%84%D8%BA%D8%A9_%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9
- Mugair, S. K. (2014). A Comparative Study of Euphemism and Dysphemism in English and Arabic with Special Reference to Political Discourse. *Journal of Advances in Linguistics*, 4(1).
- Polite.(2000).. Retrieved <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/polite> *Oxford Online Dictionary*
- Rabab'ah, G., & Al-Qarni, A. M. (2012). Euphemism in Saudi Arabic and British English. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 44(6-7), 730-743.
- Tailor, A., & Ogden, J. (2009). Avoiding the term 'obesity': an experimental study of the impact of doctors' language on patients' beliefs. *Patient education and counseling*, 76(2), 260-264.
- Tawalbeh, A., & Al-Oqaily, E. (2012). In-directness and politeness in American English and Saudi Arabic requests: A cross-cultural comparison. *Asian Social Science*, 8(10), 85.

APPENDIX A

There are many undesirable utterance and phrases that are mostly replaced by other desirable instances in certain social situations due to the individuals' willingness to be polite and inoffensive. please state the phrases that you personally use in the following situations. (not what you will do)

Topic 1: Death \ You have been informed that a friend's relative has died. You want to pass this information to your friend. How would you say that?

Topic 2: Abortion \ Imagine that you are a doctor and your patient lost her fetal. How would you say that for her?

Topic 3: Cancer \ You have been informed that a friend's relative has cancer. You want to pass the information to your friend. How would you say that?

Topic 4: Brain Death \ Imagine that you are a doctor. You have a patient who has brain death. How would you say that for his family?

Topic 5: Failing the course\ You have been informed that your friend failed the course. You want to pass this information to your friend. How would you say that?

Topic 6: Demented \ A friend's sister has a problem in her mind (demented). You want to tell him about a place that deals with patients who are like his sister. What would call that place?

Topic 7: Old age \ You met your friend's father and you were surprised because his age is more than 70. Your friend asks you why you were surprised. What would you say to him?

Topic 8: Poorness \ You have a project with your friends and all of you have to pay a lot of money You know that your friend does not have money because he is not rich. How would you say that to your friends?

Topic 9: Inactive\ Imagine that you are a teacher. You have a student who is inactive and his grade is always bad. You want to tell his parents about his level. How would you say that?

APPENDIX B

هناك العديد من العبارات و الكلام الغير مُحبذ قوله و غالباً ما يتم استبداله في المواقف الاجتماعية نظراً لرغبة الشخص بأن يكون مهذب و غير مؤذٍ. فضلاً، اجب عن الاسئلة التالية وفقاً لاستخدامك المعتاد لهذه العبارات:

موضوع ١: الموت / قد علمت ان قريب صديقك قد توفي وتريد ان تخبره، فكيف ستقول ذلك له؟

موضوع ٢: الاجهاض / تخيل انك طبيب و مريضتك فقدت جنينها، كيف ستخبرها بذلك؟

موضوع ٣: مرض السرطان / قد علمت ان قريب صديقك لديه مرض السرطان وتريد ان تخبره فكيف ستقول ذلك له؟

موضوع ٤: الموت دماغياً / تخيل انك طبيب ولديك مريض ميت دماغياً فكيف ستخبر اهله بذلك؟

موضوع ٥: الاخفاق في الفصل الدراسي / قد علمت ان صديقك قد اخفق في الفصل الدراسي وتريد ان تخبره بذلك فكيف ستقول ذلك له ؟

موضوع ٦: مختل عقلي / لدى اخت صديقك مشكلة عقلية (مختلة عقلياً) وتريد ان تخبره عن مكان يمكنه التعامل مع مرضى لديهم المشكلة ذاتها فماذا ستطلق على ذلك المكان؟

موضوع ٧: العجوز / قابلت والد صديقك و تفاجأت بانه كبير السن و عمره يتجاوز ٧٠ سنة و سألك صديقك لماذا كنت متفاجئ، فماذا ستجيب عليه؟

موضوع ٨: الفقر / انت واصدقائك لديكم مشروع ويتطلب مشروعهما الكثير من المال و انت تعرف ان احد اصدقائك لا يملك المال حتى يدفع، فكيف ستخبر اصدقائك عنه؟

موضوع ٩: الكسل / تخيل انك معلم ولديك طالب غير نشيط وعلاماته دائماً سيئة وتريد ان تخبر والديه عن مستواه، فكيف ستقول ذلك لهم؟