

An Analysis of Euphemism in 2 Broke Girls

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Abstract

As a language phenomenon which widely exists in our human society, euphemism plays a crucial part in the process of language learning and social communication. Although the study of euphemism is not a new topic, the increasingly developing euphemism is still worth of being emphasized and analyzed. Then this thesis discusses euphemism in 2 Broke Girls from three aspects: how different people utilize different euphemism, main contents of euphemism, and expressional methods. What I have studied includes euphemism which was usually used before and which is prevalent now as well. My thesis analyzes language phenomenon and illustrates it with examples. I really hope my paper can give some enlightenment to English learners and help them to surmount the obstacle of comprehending euphemism and English culture.

Key words: euphemism; social communication; language phenomenon; English culture

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of Research

Euphemism is widely used in our daily life; it is not only a language phenomenon, but also a language tool with powerful social functions. In addition to its functions, euphemism can reflect something deeper about one language, for instance, culture, people's values, etc. In order to get a better understanding of English and people from English-speaking countries, learning and making a research of their utilization of euphemism is an advisable method for us English learners. The reason why I choose to research and analyze euphemism in 2 Broke Girls is quite simple. This newly well-received American TV drama covers all kinds of euphemism, and its screenwriter tactfully makes good use of euphemism to create a comedy effect. Analyzing euphemism in this drama will bring us into contact with recently popular use of euphemism, American culture and values.

Even though many scholars and linguists have delved into the research of euphemism and made a remarkable contribution to this realm, I still find something new about euphemism in 2 Broke Girls that deserves my analysis and research. And I really hope I can learn more euphemism and how to do a research after finish this dissertation. At the same time, I also hope readers will find it easier to comprehend lines in American TV drama and their language performance in American English after reading my paper.

Method of Research

First of all, I have watched almost all episodes of 2 Broke Girls, and picked up 7 to 8 typical ones to collect useful data---copy down all euphemisms occurred in actors' lines.

Secondly, I will introduce main characters' background (race, age, social status) and make a comparison between their different backgrounds and different use of euphemisms. Next step is to analyze how and why people's backgrounds have an influence on their use of euphemisms.

Thirdly, since I have already collected enough data, I will classify them in respect of contents of euphemism. According to my classification, it would be simple to find out what kind of things euphemism mainly refers to. The second classification of material gathered before is about means of expression. A clear category helps a lot to analyze whether euphemisms used in episodes are expressed through phonetic method, word-building method, glossary method or rhetoric method. Additionally, each method of research or analysis will be illustrated by examples from *2 Broke Girls*.

Different People's Utilization of Euphemism

In this American sitcom---*2 Broke Girls*, there are four main characters: Max, Caroline, Earl and Han. Han is the boss of a restaurant, and other three are his employees. They four are totally different people. Max, a self-supported waitress, has an irresponsible alcoholic mother, and she even does not know who is her biological father. In order to live on, Max has to earn her keep when she was just a little girl. Under this situation, it is reasonable for her to be not that well-educated, and sometimes vulgar. Caroline, a blonde girl used to be brought up in a super wealthy family and surrounded by a bunch of friends from the upper class. She led a decent life before, and received a high-quality education. But her father's financial crime and imprisonment bring an earth-shaking change to her life, so she has to work as a waitress as Max in Han's restaurant to earn her bread. Earl, a senior black man who was an unknown rock star in his youth, but now he is a humorous cashier working for Han. The last one is Han, as I mentioned above, he is the owner of this restaurant. He is an Asian American, so his strong Asian accent and height are always his employees' laughingstocks.

Different Race's Utilization of Euphemism

People come from different races tend to use different euphemisms. What race individuals belong to will influence their language behaviors as I have introduced before, Earl, an Afro-American, he is not a white man. Once when he heard that Caroline collected money from Internet if people are willing to pay her 1500 dollars to buy a new pair of trousers, they can slap her on her face. Earl suddenly said "Being white is easy." He euphemistically convey many Afro-Americans' inner thought---living in America, white men lead an easier and better life than the black. Even though the black's life has been improved a lot for the Emancipation Proclamation and the society and citizens' progress, they are still oppressed by discrimination from every aspect. Another example is "You can't tell an Asian he made a mistake or he will go in the back and throw himself on a sword." In many western people's mind, it must be a killing humiliation for an Asian if his mistake is pointed out in public because Asians are so keen on face-saving. Therefore, Max indirectly tries to persuade Caroline not to speak out Han's wrong. As an American girl, Max makes full uses of euphemisms to express her idea of Asian people that they sometimes cherish face and honor more than their lives, and they are not willing to admit mistakes in front of everyone. It is an issue of dignity. Each race has their peculiar history, literature, customs and taboos, language and so on, so people's language performance will show traits of environment which they grow up from. So we can get information about one race's attitude and thought towards another race via an analysis of their euphemisms.

In a word, speaker's race does have an influence on their use of euphemism, and you can tell from their words.

Different Social Status' Utilization of Euphemism

People come from different social status use different euphemisms. What social status they are being may affect their euphemisms. When Max and Caroline pay a visit to Max's wealthy boyfriend's home, a rich couple in that dinner party blames Caroline for their great loss in her father's financial crime by telling people "We moved from the penthouse to the fourth floor!" (Penthouse is an expensive and comfortable flat/apartment or set of rooms at the top of a tall building.) And the price of a top floor in a tall building is higher than other floors. Although this rich couple still live in a luxurious Upper East Side apartment, they are still unsatisfied with the current situation and express their sense of superiority in euphemistic words without mentioning how much money they have got directly. On the opposite side, Max, a girl comes from low social status, tells the couple "We only have 5 chopsticks and a fork from Kentucky Fried Chicken, and we do fine." to depict their tough but satisfying life. Those people of high social status will use seven silver forks and ten knives in just one meal; however, people like Max even haven't got a complete set of tableware. Her 5 chopsticks are even not 5 pairs of chopsticks, and the only fork is a free and plastic one from KFC. She also euphemistically answers back that couple's rude words and helps Caroline to get out of the dilemma.

Obviously, people of different social status use their own style of euphemism to express their thought and life. They live in different living circles hence almost are in contact with their own kind of people, confront A Gordian Knot only occurs in their social status, so how they handle and view problems vary considerably, so does their euphemism behaviors. Reading between lines, euphemisms used by different speakers can reflect their different level of social status and life situation, and this kind of distinction exists in every society.

Different Age Groups' Utilization of Euphemism

People come from different age groups use different euphemisms. In Season 3 Episode 3, Caroline desperately wants to buy a new pair of high-quality but expensive trousers, but now she is not as rich as before. By way of selling the right of slapping her face on the Internet to get financial support, she finally collects enough money. When Earl, a senior citizen, gets the information that Caroline has raised 1500 dollars via that means, he gives an exclamation of surprise "I've lived too long." He euphemistically expresses his amazement that even though he has lived 70 years, this kind of collection is absolutely new for him. And in America, any peculiar way to make money is acceptable.

Earl exclaims over he has lived too long; however, Caroline says "I don't want to die!" "Me too! I have a boy friend and my first B (in pastry school)." Max replies when they two are dangerously standing on a high-rise windowsill and hit by hails. Max mentions "a boy friend" and her "first B" in her school to indirectly tell us she finds life is beautiful and worth of being cherished. She just not wants to end her life by dropping from a skyscraper at a young age.

Individuals' minds are not the same in different age groups. It may be altered by one's life experience, peer pressure, and physical condition. A youth is less likely to think about living is such a lucky thing and how valuable everyday is; while, a senior citizen is likely to feel grateful to have one more day's living, and not that afraid of death for he has gone through thick and thin and tasted the bitterness and sweetness of being alive. Their ample experiences give them another view of life.

So, in conclusion, people of different age groups will use different euphemisms to convey their thought and attitude towards life.

Contents of Euphemism

Euphemism is “word of good omen”, so anything is concerned with taboo or sensitive issues expressed by an indirect and euphemistical way can be regarded as euphemisms. That explains why contents of euphemism cover so many fields. I have watched almost all episodes of 2 Broke Girls, so euphemism data collected from 7 to 8 typical ones picked up by me can represent main contents of euphemism.

In this popular American sitcom, I find out euphemisms in lines almost concentrate on four kinds: drug, sex, death and stature.

Drug

As we all know that although the United States is a country of liberty, selling and taking drugs are still illegal there. Characters, especially Max and Earl, sometimes talk about cocaine straightforward, but mostly they do it euphemistically. For instance, Max used to describe a drugster’s situation as “He’s really out of it” instead of “He is unconscious of anything for taking too much drug.” (Out of it: not aware what is happening, usually because of drinking too much alcohol or taking drugs.) In addition to that, Caroline once made fun of Max’s unaware of neck pain and explained to Earl “She’s almost made of Vicodin.” (Vicodin is a brand name of painkiller used to relieve moderate to severe pain.) Apparently, Carline is implying that Max takes a heavy dose of Vicodin as a soft drug rather than a painkiller under a medication guide. Among all euphemisms I have collected from episodes, drug takes up 16 percent. Actually, so many euphemisms for drugs in American drama indicate something we need to look through its surface.

First, there are still thousands of Americans taking drugs, and weeds are accessible to them.

Second, Americans are not that sensitive about taking drugs which explains why they make up a chain of euphemisms for drugs and can use it on screen without being censored.

Third, taking drugs is not only pernicious for our health but also our family and society; while, Americans do not receive the same education as we do, and their culture does not regard drug-taking as a major issue as we do. Taking drugs is more acceptable for them than us, so under their social and educational environment the number of euphemisms for drug is larger in their language than ours.

Sex

According to my data collection, 38%---the largest proportion of euphemisms occurs in 2 Broke Girls is taken by sex. Compared with Asian or other countries, English culture may be more acceptable about sex which is even a taboo subject in many other cultures. However, English-speaking people also prefer to talk about sex in euphemistical words.

One night, when Caroline picks up her phone at 2:30am, Max deliberately says “If it’s after 2:30, the call is for the dirty” to make fun of Caroline, and drop a hint about this call is a booty call. Max does not directly inform audiences that the one who makes the phone call wants to sleep with Caroline, but she uses “the dirty” to replace sexual activity. In the culture of English-speaking countries, it was a taboo to mention people’s private parts and sexual activity,

especially in Britain. Citizens may feel embarrassed and vulgar once someone refers to something about sex. And that is the reason why there exist a large number of euphemisms for sexual organs and activities.

However, things have changed since the “sexual liberation” happened in 1960s, America. In recent decades, English-speaking countries adopt a more casual and frank attitude towards sex. As I explained above, in spite of the fact that talking about sex is no longer a taboo in America, people still prefer to use euphemism for it, especially people of high social status. An euphemistic way prevents people from being embarrassed and offended, and it adds some humor to the talk as well. Understanding more euphemistic expression of sex would be helpful for English learners to catch on English speakers’ (dirty) jokes, and deeper meaning.

Stature

Employees in Han's restaurant often tease him about his height, and he has no alternative but to accept it. Han is about five feet tall, and that is a quite small size in western society. In one episode, Earl's tall and stout son pays a visit to him. His son just cannot help laughing when sees Han at their first meet, and says something insulting about Han's stature. There is no doubt that boss Han is pissed off, but Earl comforts him with “take it easy, fun size.” “Fun size” is an euphemism for Han's little and child-like body. Another classical euphemism comes from Max “the only thing he (Han) ever needed was a stepladder.” Because Han is not tall and he always believe that he still can grow taller one day, so Max euphemistically tells us it is impossible for him to naturally grow taller, and only a stepladder could realize Han's dream. In addition to euphemisms about Han's height come from employees' mouths, his own lines, designed by the humorous screenwriter, are also making fun of his size euphemistically. For instance, one day, when all of them in the restaurant see a nine or ten years old boy is still breast feeding, Han is so amazed and blurts out “the kid is my height” Seemingly, this sentence conveys a piece of information that a boy is approximately four inches tall but his mother still keeps on breast feeding him, and that is so weird and uncommon. Virtually, it indirectly shows that, as an adult, Han is only as high as a nine or ten years old boy. Euphemisms of stature account for 14% of my collection of euphemism in 2 Broke Girls. Personally speaking, I do not think euphemisms about Han's height merely add comedy effect to the story of 2 Broke Girls. It also reflects that, in Americans' mind, Koreans or even Asians are not tall on average.

Death

The fourth main content of euphemism is death. Euphemisms for death have a long history, no matter in Chinese or English. With the development of English, the number of euphemisms for death is also growing which shows people increasingly regard death as a taboo. Even though medical technology has made a fantastic progress, for us immortal human beings, death is still unavoidable. When Earl, he even cannot clearly remember how old he is, talks about death is like having a good time “I finally can have a good rest.” “A good rest” is an euphemism for death, and it has a fair-sounding connotation. For Earl, death can be treated as a rest which relieves him from the earth's annoyance. Death takes up 12% of all euphemisms I have collected. Another example comes from Caroline “yesterday a rock star, today he's gone.” Somebody has gone is also a common use of euphemism for death in English. The word “gone” dose not show a strong emotional coloring, and it implies death in an obscure way. Referring to death by utilizing “gone” is more polite and less painful. Comparing Earl's and Caroline's lines about death, and other characters' euphemisms, I find out that no matter the young or the elderly, they all have a preference to discuss death euphemistically, especially others' death. Talking about their own one, sometimes they may use “die” directly; while, in terms of others, they will choose euphemism out of respect and politeness.

Three Means of Expression

After the research of different people use different euphemisms, and contents of euphemisms in *2 Broke Girls*, I turn to the research of means of expression. Linguists usually tend to classify expressional methods into two broad categories: glossary method and grammatical method, but here I want to discuss expressional methods more specifically.

Glossary method

Acronym

"An acronym is a word composed of the first letters of the words in a phrase, especially when this is used as a name." It is not only a kind of word formation, but also a clever way to express one's thought euphemistically. In Season Three Episode 19, the background is Saint Patrick's Day. Caroline and Max have drunk too much beer in a small bar. The worst thing is when Caroline desperately wants to use the restroom, but there isn't enough ladies' room for girls. In this case, Max suggests her making use of Men's room to answer the nature's call. However, Caroline prefers to find another ladies' room rather than take Max's suggestion. At that moment, Max says "Oh, RIP" to amuse Caroline, and euphemistically warn her that if she still insist on her mind, maybe she may die for not urinating in time. "RIP" takes the first letters of "Rest In Pee", it is an animation of "Rest In Peace". The acronym for "Rest In Peace" has been used for quite a long time, so Max's use of this creative "RIP" is full of wit and humor. Another example for acronym in euphemism is "well, I kinda like to keep my skirt wearing on the D. L." "D.L.", it means "down low", and this phrase is an euphemism for "secret". Earl doesn't want his experience of wearing a skirt to be known by other people, so he indirectly tells Max to keep it secret. Comparatively speaking, acronym is a frequently used method of expressional method in *2 Broke Girls*.

Compounding

Compound word is another method in *2 Broke Girls*' euphemisms. As a way of word formation, compounding is high-yield so many new words come from it. And it is true of being a way of expressing euphemisms; a large amount of new euphemisms are formed by compounding. "Compound is a noun, an adjective or a verb made of two or more words or parts of words, written as one or more words." "Hairgasm" in Season 3 Episode 17 is a good example for compound word as an euphemism. In that episode, Caroline and Max go to a hair saloon and want to have their hair cut. Before giving them a haircut, hairdressers will wash their hair first and offer them a massage for relaxation. Max feels so comfortable that she cannot help describing this shampoo process as "hairgasm". Hairgasm is compounded by "hair" and "orgasm" (the moment during sexual activity when feelings of sexual pleasure are at their strongest.) Here Max's compound word euphemistically means the experience of getting an enjoyable hair massage is as joyful as having an orgasm. Only comparing her hair massage feeling to an orgasm is too vulgar; however, compounding hair and orgasm together to make this new word "hairgasm" is much better. First, this vivid description shows how Max feels about her hair massage (it is as pleasant as having an orgasm). Second, not mentioning orgasm directly but adding the word "hair" to the head of orgasm is more euphemistic and elegant in language expression.

As I mentioned above, compounding is a high-yield way of both word formation and euphuism formation. Since many current and prevalent euphemisms are expressed by compound words, we are supposed to pay more attention to compound word which is an important expressional

method of euphemism if we are desirous to comprehend updating English and euphemisms better.

Glossary method

Synonyms

No matter in Chinese, English or other languages, sometimes we may choose a synonym instead of a hash but real word to directly express our meaning. A synonym may be more acceptable and less hurtful for listeners. Apparently, synonym's euphemistic effect is well acknowledged. Since it is a common expressional method of euphemism, I will only explain one example in the following passage. Earl once said "Actually I try never to look at your ladies the chest area." Chest area is a synonym for "breast", but it sounds more polite and cultured. Synonyms are widely used as an expressional method of euphemism, and it does avoid some embarrassment and impoliteness.

Fuzzy Words

Fuzzy words are used to euphemistically express people's mind which means we prefer to use ambiguous words rather than clear and frank words. Ambiguous words can make people understand what is happening; meanwhile, they will not let them feel embarrassed as well. "Affair" is one of those familiar fuzzy words for us. It can be utilized to replace something significant or trivial, good or bad, happy or unhappy.

Another common fuzzy word is "something". In Season 3 Episode 18, Max asks her boy friend "Do you have something?" Something doesn't mean something to eat or drink, but sickness. Directly asking people whether they are sick or uncomfortable is definitely impolite and improper in western society, but the use of "something" is euphemistic and sweet-sounding. Of course, something does not always mean sickness, and it depends on the context.

Negation

Negation is also prevalent in euphemism. Negation ("the exact opposite side of something") in euphemism is expressing one thing from its opposite side. Talking about Han's height, others are unlikely to describe him as "short"; instead of it, they usually choose "not tall". It is well known that tall is the opposite side of "short". For people whose height is not that satisfactory, "not tall" is much easier for them to psychologically accept than short.

Some direct words are harsh and unpleasant. Even though those words are true, they still make listeners feel insulted or uncomfortable. If we want to communicate with people skillfully and socialize well, sometimes utilizing a word from its opposite side to euphemistically express our mind must be more helpful than we thought before.

Phonetic Method

Phonetic omission, weak stress, punctuation, phonetic distortion, etc. are phonetic methods used in euphemism, but the most typical one in *2 Broke Girls* is phonetic distortion. In Saint Patrick's Day, every street is congestive. Earl, Max, Caroline, Han and Oleg (Han's another employee) are in the same taxi which is stuck in a traffic jam. Oleg is dying to arrive at their destination to sell his Saint Patrick's Day T-shirts. In this case, he is too impatient to wait so Oleg orders their taxi driver to drive faster and shows a total disregard for the traffic jam. When Oleg gets to know the driver is a Russian, Oleg satirizes him "you call you Russian, doesn't seem like you are rushing anywhere." In this sentence, rushing is a phonetic distortion for Russian, and Oleg uses it to euphemistically convey his idea that the Russian driver drives so slow that he is not worthy of the name of Russian (rushing). Here, *2 Broke Girls*

screenwriter makes a skillful use of phonetic distortion to express euphemism and it leaves a deep impression in audiences' mind.

Rhetoric Method

According to my classification and analysis in the whole, rhetoric methods in *2 Broke Girls* can be concluded as metaphorical transfer, metonymical transfer and understatement.

Metaphorical Method

When two things have the same quality, using its metaphor to replace original word or phrase will be more euphemistic and pleasing to listeners' ears. Earl's line in Season 3 Episode 4 "I want to have a long rest and go to sleep forever." "Sleep forever" is a metaphor of "death"; they two have some similar qualities ---lie down and have a rest. However, death is a permanent sleep but a single sleep is brief and can be waken up.

Metonymical Transfer

"Referring to something by the name of something else that is closely connected with it can be regarded as metaphor." Metonymical transfer is an expressional method of euphemism by using metonymies.

One example I have demonstrated in the above passage "She's almost made of Vicodin". That is how Caroline talks about Max's no feeling of pain. Vicodin is an American brand name of painkiller which is Americans' daily medicine. Caroline refers painkiller by the name of a well known brand---Vicodin. It is closely linked with painkiller, and Americans can quickly get her hint. Metonymical transfer will not directly speak out its real meaning, but requires listeners to connect it with users' actual reference. It can be found in many euphemisms; while, to lightly understand it is almost impossible. Metonymic transfer in different languages reflects its language's or country's culture, social and other information. So some euphemisms related to metonymic transfer are obstacles for English learners.

Understatement

Understatement is "a statement that makes something less important, impressive, serious, etc. than it really is." On Caroline and Max's cupcake shop's soft opening day, they instruct Han and Oleg to their newly decorated hovel. Han used to depict it as "smelly dump". "Smelly" is an understatement of stinking, for there exists many dead body of mice in this hovel before, and Max even exaggeratedly says "it used to smell like the place poop comes to die." Han only uses "smelly" to euphemistically inform us that the hovel has an unpleasant smell, so he has minimized the degree of odour. Understatement in euphemism makes people feel less uncomfortable, and instructs us to think from a passive aspect.

CONCLUSION

This paper focuses on the analysis of how different people utilize different euphemism, main contents of euphemism and their expressional methods in American TV drama *2 Broke Girls*. Even though euphemism has been an old research topic in linguistics, it is still worth of being analyzed for its rapidly developing and updating.

Analyzing and researching euphemism in *2 Broke Girls* cannot be regarded as a deep study of euphemism, but we surely can gain something valuable about English from it. At least, we English learners can make a progress in understanding English euphemism, culture, and

values. More studies are supposed to be carried out if we want to keep with the improvement of euphemism.

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