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## COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTIONS OF EUPHEMISMS IN PERSIAN

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### Abstract

In each culture, taboo domains are subject to varying degrees of constraint and prohibition. Euphemisms, on the other hand, are proper means of talking about these sensitive topics. Adopting Allan & Burrige's (2006) pragmatic approach towards euphemisms, we aimed to find how euphemisms in Persian communicate different intentions in pragmatic contexts. The data collected from Persian daily conversations and newspapers and their analysis indicated that in this language, these expressions are divided into three categories based on the communicative function they hold. Firstly, euphemisms are motivated by taboo topics and are mainly used to avoid affronting both speaker's and the hearer's face. Secondly, they function as a stylistic marker where their use is not a response to taboo topics; rather, they are merely kinder words which fit in the context of use. Thirdly, in Persian, euphemism is used by people in power to deceive ordinary people and impose a certain ideology on them to control their thought.

**Key Words:** Euphemism, Dysphemism, Taboo Word, Face, Doublespeak.

### 1. Introduction

Language users always avoid using words and expressions which are unpleasant, inappropriate or embarrassing to them or to whom they are conversing. This censoring of language occurs primarily unconsciously through applying euphemistic expressions. The contribution of euphemisms to maintaining interpersonal interactions on safe grounds is undeniable. Fear, shame, and disgust are three principal factors motivating the use of euphemisms. However, in spite of being known as "linguistic fig leaves" or "means of sweet talking", euphemisms are utilized, in a thoroughly distinct function, by people in power to convert the reality and to deceive ordinary people. In nondemocratic societies, the term "expediency" is an ever substitute for "lie" and doublespeak artists picture a fake world to make the laymen believe in the dominant ideology. In this paper, we aim to characterize the communicative functions of euphemisms in Persian by resorting to the pragmatic definition of euphemisms proposed by Allan & Burrige (1991, 2006) in which interlocutors' face wants are correlated with euphemisms and talking euphemistically is to avoid a face threatening act. First, we elaborate on Allan & Burrige's view points on what euphemisms are and then briefly take a glance at the crucial features of euphemisms or what makes a euphemism a euphemism. Finally, we will provide three distinct but related communicative functions for euphemisms in Persian language based on the data taken from daily conversations and newspapers.

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## 2. Theoretical assumptions

Indirectness is a communicative strategy by means of which, speakers avoid being outspoken and attempt to hold a correspondence between their talk and face considerations. Adopting indirectness strategy through using euphemistic terms helps: 1. Speakers prevent from mentioning socially distasteful topics. 2. Minimize the threat of overt confrontation. By virtue of euphemisms, as part of each language's politeness system, one finds it easier to communicate his intents without affronting the hearer's face and get rid of unpleasant terms with too negative overtones.

Almost all traditional definitions of euphemism consider it as a merely lexical substitution which results from the speaker's reluctance to insult the hearer. (Crystal, 1992; Rawson, 1981). But Allan & Burridge (2006) have adopted a pragmatic approach towards studying euphemisms which is simultaneously both speaker-oriented and hearer-oriented. In other words, euphemism is a face saving mechanism which emphasizes mutual cooperation in a conversation. Quoting Allan & Burridge (2006)'s definition of euphemism can illuminate our face-centered discussion of euphemisms: "They are words or phrases used as an alternative to a dispreferred expression. They avoid possible loss of face by the speaker and also the hearer or some third party" (ibid, 32).

Obviously, a social interaction is generally oriented towards maintaining face and language speakers, according to an implicit mutual agreement, highly concern their face wants. Referring to an inappropriate topic is a threat to positive face and substituting a euphemism for a blunt term is a common strategy for reducing positive face threat (Brown & Levinson, 1987). For example, when a Persian speaker mentions a disgusting topic like "defecation" by using a dysphemistic expression like "*beramberinam*" (I want to shit), rather than "*servisakojast?*" (where is the restroom?) which is the politest form of raising the topic, he is threatening the participants' concerns for positive face. Whereas the latter expression indicates the speaker's commitment to maintaining the positive face since this question conceals the nature of the work and the place either. Of course it should be noted that politeness depends on social status and is determined by factors like the relationship between participants, topic, setting, and the medium, so there wouldn't be the same reactions once a taboo topic is raised.

## 3. What makes a euphemism a euphemism

For a linguistic expression to function as a euphemism and to be communicatively efficient, it should necessarily contain some features. These structural traits determine the euphemistic force of a given expression. We examine these crucial features in the form of three principles:

### 3.1. Distance principle

Euphemism is an alternative to socially distasteful terms. In contrary to taboo words where the signifier and the referent are closely connected, in a euphemism, this distance is much farther. This very distance determines the mitigating capacity of a euphemistic expression and the amount of a given word's ambiguity in referring to a taboo area. Ambiguity is a defining feature of euphemisms as a linguistic phenomenon, a term acts as a euphemism because, in a given context, it is capable of generating an ambiguity which suggests that there may be a distasteful concept beneath and thus it permits the mitigation of the taboo (Fernandez, 2006:16). This contrast between a linguistic term and its taboo referent is satisfactorily maintained through making novel metaphors. For example, "*aslahe*" (weapon) or "*folan*" (an abstract term meaning something unknown) can communicate a taboo body part like "penis", and at the same time function a euphemism in a specific context. Metaphoric euphemisms can maintain their mitigating capacity in a given pragmatic context. The ambiguity resulted from making new metaphoric euphemisms flout the cooperation principle and give rise to conversational implicatures (Brown & Levinson, 1987:216). Nevertheless, it acts in accordance with the politeness principle. Therefore, we can say that euphemism is the representation and the result of politeness principle. Among Persian speakers a euphemistic expression like

*"moshkel e zanane"* (a female problem) in a formal and polite gathering is appropriately used to refer to "womb related diseases" which is highly considered taboo. This metonymically based euphemism greatly veils the specific organ to which the problem is pertained.

### 3.2. Correlation principle

As it was stated, there is a direct relationship between the euphemistic force of a term and the level of contrast between a signifier and its taboo referent. However, too much distance leading to an uncommon ambiguity runs the risk of not properly communicating and being misunderstood by the hearer(s). A euphemistic term chosen should be relevant to the taboo concept for which it has been substituted and its interpretation in the immediate context should be possible for the audience. If we consider euphemisms as basically metaphorical, there ought to be a similarity between source and target concepts, for example, in a statement like *"shab too rakht e khabeshbarounmiad"* (it's raining in his bed at nights), the word "baroun" (raining) is interpreted as "urination" because of the similarity which is held between different aspects of these two concepts. On the other hand, substituting the same statement with another word like *"sang"* (stone) in place of "baroun" (raining) will never have the same euphemistic effect mainly because the above mentioned aspects of similarity are not observed anymore.

### 3.3. Pleasantness principle

Each euphemism must have more positive connotations compared to its taboo counterpart or at least less negative overtones. Various linguistic devices such as remodeling, circumlocution, omission, figurative language and so on are applied to ameliorate the most unpleasing connotations of a dysphemistic term and fit it in the context and also avoid the stylistic discord that might come along as a result of using a coarse word with too negative connotations. For example, *"ghooz fish"* is a remodeled form of *"goozpich"* (literally fart turned) which means "completely confused"; the distorted form has lost too many of its unpleasant connotations and has turned into a more appropriate expression to be used in a rather polite friendly conversation. Or an evasive statement like *"darayetab'egarm"* (with a warm temperament) is a frequently used substitute for *"hashari"* (horny) which is too nasty to utter in a male-female talk.

## 4. Communicative functions of euphemisms in Persian

Based on what has been stated so far, euphemizing process, through some particular linguistic devices, attempts to maintain the face wants of interlocutors and not to transgress the depicted cultural boundaries. Language users acquire sufficient means of censoring their behavior and their tongue by virtue of being aware of taboo as well as permitted cultural domains. In this section we will find out what roles a euphemism is primarily assigned and how it responds to different motivating factors in Persian.

### 4.1. Taboo prevention

Taboos arise out of social constraints on the individual's behavior where it can cause discomfort, harm or injury (Allan & Burridge, 2006:1). Some particular topics are constrained or thoroughly censored out mainly because they evoke fear, shame or disgust in participants. Taboo language is offensive, dysphemistic and against politeness standards, therefore, it is condemned and replaced by euphemisms. Fatal diseases, death, and holy persons and places are three fear based taboos among Persian speakers which are usually talked about with too much care and highly euphemistically. The unknown sources of some diseases (in the past), the lack of an absolute treatment for them and primarily the association of these with death has led to an evasive language to mention them. Applying medical jargons and circumlocutions are common ways of avoiding this taboo topic. The first of each following pair indicates a taboo word and the second one is the Persian euphemistic counterpart:

*Saratan:kanser*(cancer)

*eidz : HIV mosbat* (AIDS positive)

*Saktemaghzi:esterok* (stroke)

Of course there are other diseases which are euphemized because of being in association to taboo body parts and here fear is not involved as a motivating factor. For example, *Suzak* and *Siflis* are the name of two diseases pertaining to sexual organs and are replaced by "*amraz e mogharebati*" (intercourse diseases) which refers indirectly to the cause of the disease rather than naming them. Farsi speakers also utilize some preventive statements before mentioning the name of the disease which double the euphemistic force of the expressions:

*Nasibnashe! Ye bimari e laaalaajgerfte.*

(*I wish no one gets it! He has an incurable disease.*)

In Lori dialect (spoken in some western cities of Iran) people use some interesting wishing expressions as preventive statements while talking about cancer:

*Gorg e biabounham nabine! Saratan dare.*

(I wish not even a **wolf in desert** gets it! He has **Cancer**)

In the above statement, the initial wishing expression neutralizes the negative effect of naming a fatal disease, i.e, cancer.

Death is another area which evokes fear and nervousness. Most of death language in Persian is created by virtue of euphemistic metaphors, moreover, circumlocutions, jargons and expressions with implicature are also widely used to refer to death in the most pleasant and distant way:

*Vaghtibaba raft, man bacheboudam. Doktorjavabeshkarde*

(When dad **went**, I was just a kid)

(Doctor has rejected him)

In Iranian hospitals, "*des shodan*" (to die) is euphemistically referred to the each case of death. "*des*" is the Farsi pronunciation of "death". In daily conversation, people most often use the following hyperbolic statement to refer to someone's death:

*Omresho dad be shoma (he gave his life time to you)*

Since people traditionally believe that taboo of death is transmitted through mentioning its name, Farsi speakers immune the hearer against the taboo by granting the dead's total life time to him. The other frequently used euphemism is again a kind of preventive statement which precedes any death related word:

*Hezar sale bashid! Khandidanetshabiheounkhodabiamorze*

(**I wish you to be alive for 1000 years!** Your way of smiling is similar to that **God-blessed**).

*Dour azjoon! Age chizitbeshe man chekarkonam?*

(**I wish it to be far away from you!** If **something happens to you**, what should I do?)

"It" in the above sentence refers to death.

Conceptual metaphors like "death is passing" and "death is a trip" are the bases of most of the euphemisms formed in Persian especially in formal contexts; euphemistic metaphors like "*dargozashtan*" and "*safarkardan*" are the linguistic manifestations of the above conceptual metaphors respectively.

Although there might exist some other fear based taboos, most of euphemisms are currently used to avoid affronting the face wants of both speaker and hearer in a particular context and not because of the fear of a possible physical injury (Allan & Burridge, 1991, 2006). Taboo body parts, bodily functions and effluvia, sexual acts are among the most censored areas in Farsi. It seems that a particular religion based version of morality has enormously influenced the degree of abandonment. Religious jargons (which are Arabic borrowed terms) have

provided a rich source of linguistic substitutes for the topics deemed taboo. For example, "aalat"(tool), "posht"(behind), "jelo" (front)are used to euphemistically refer to "sexual organs of either male or female", "ass" and "female sexual organ" respectively. More examples are as follows:

"Seda" (sound)refers to "fart"                      seks(sex) refers to sexual intercourse

"Madfou"(what comes out) refers to "faeces"

"refleks" (reflex) refers to "vomit"

Most of Iranian females usually say "I'm not feeling well" or "I'm sick" when they want to talk about their monthly period.

#### 4.2. Stylistic marker

A large number of euphemisms are not responding to taboos, rather they have more positive connotations and seem to be more appropriate in a particular context. So, euphemism interacts with style and each certain style defines the set of euphemisms which are conventional within that style (Allan & Burridge,2007). Accordingly, these kind of euphemisms result from the speaker's stylistic considerations to maintain politeness in the conversation; stylistic euphemisms are utilized to promote the denotatum,for they carry more positive connotations. When speaker and hearer don't possess equal social status, they attempt not to cause misunderstanding through picking up an improper style. The first kinds of words which are euphemized through stylistic euphemisms (or kind words) are low jobs. In Persian, some occupations are replaced by the superordinate organization where those people are working for. For example, instead of "sofour" (garbage collector), "mordeshour" (dead washer), a new euphemism "karmand e shahrdari" (municipality clerk) is used. Or instead of "ashpazi"(cooking) as job, "keitering" (Catering) is applied.As a result of changing attitudes towards jobs, many of jobs' names altered into kinder more respectable names. Right now, the word "karegar"(worker) is not as frequently used as it used to and is mostly replaced by "karmand"(clerk). A "farrash" (janitor) is now "baba ye madrese"(school's dad). Physical and personality traits are also stylistically changed by means of understatement. For example, "kammou" (having few hair), "roshanzamir"(with a light inside), "naashenava"(not able to hear) are used to refer to "bald", "blind" and "deaf" people respectively. In relation to personality traits many replacements are made in Persian not to humiliate people's unusual features. For instance, "khaas "(especial) is referred to a crazy person; "poreshteha" (having much appetite) is referred to a person who eats unusually; "sade del" (simple hearted) is used to refer to a stupid and naïve person; "gheirati" (having manly biases which is a component feature of Iranian men) instead of a "dogmatic person".

#### 4.3. Doublespeak

All of what have been presented so far as euphemisms were to avoid threatening participants' face by hiding the unpleasant aspects of a taboo topic or applying words with more positive connotations to fit in words with their style of use. But a euphemism can be used to mislead or deceive the audience; this way it becomes a doublespeak. According to Lutz(1989) its real intent is at variance with its apparent intent. It is language designed to alter our perception of reality. This particular function of euphemisms plays an important role in distorting political and military realities through magnifying trivial matters, understating significant problems and reducing the precision; that is why they are appropriately called "cosmetic words". In the communication made through doublespeak, speaker(person in power) has direct access to realities and information and the audience(usually ordinary people) receive the information via the version that they have presented. "circumlocution", "Jargon" and "gobbledygook" are three popular techniques of building doublespeak (ibid,1989). Constructing fake concepts like "doshman"(enemy), "tahajome e farhangi" (cultural attack) are among the most popular concepts which each Iranian is born with. It fabricates an unknown and invisible enemy which has established a base right behind the borders and cruelly intends

to take everything valuable and sacred they possess from them. Moreover, this enemy is to demolish our nation's identity and culture. In Iran there is a special police which is called "gasht e amniat e ejtemaie"(social security patrol),this police promotes social security through patrolling in city streets, stopping girls and women and fining them for what is believed to be "bad hijabi"(having an improper hijab). Police also interrogate the criminals by "bazjooi e fannipolisi" (technical-police interrogation) and rarely anyone can resist it. If you happen to break a law while driving, you are not "fined" but you are given a "barg e ekhtariye"(a note paper); any kind of arrest without legal or court permission is called "hamle ye ghafelgirane"(unexpected attack).

The government needs to design more pleasant words to force people to pay more or to tolerate more; last year the government performed a program to remove the subsidies and called it "hadafmandkardan e yaraneha"(making subsidies purposeful)and hiding the most immediate consequence of this program, that is, inflation and steady price increasing. People are also invited to "contribute to the country' prosperity "by paying more taxes. In the realm of business, second hand items or fake brands are called "tejari"(business like) or "estok"( in stock); this way they never lose customers and those items still have the chance of being sold.

Sometimes when reality is blurred words are employed for specific ideological purposes as Palestinians' suicide bombing attacks are interpreted as "amalyat e shahadattalabane"(martyrdom-wanting operation).

## 5. Conclusion

Persian speakers apply euphemisms to meet different communicative intentions. Except for doublespeak which is considered as a distinct communicative function of euphemisms, Farsi speakers employ euphemisms to prevent from mentioning a taboo area in their culture. Although some of these euphemistic expressions are utilized to mitigate a fear based taboo like death, most of euphemisms in Persian are used to consider the face wants of participants in a conversation where no fear of physical harm is involved and their commitment to politeness is the primary motivating factor for using them. In some other function, euphemisms are used in Persian to mark different styles from euphemistic to thoroughly dysphemistic. Here, euphemisms are not a response to taboo words but they are considered words with more pleasant and positive connotations and seek to promote the denotatum of words to fit in a particular context. Finally, in Farsi like most other languages, euphemisms can be used as means of deceiving ordinary people and making them believe in altered realities. Doublespeak is used in Persian to accept a specific version of ideology as the real one and the true one.

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