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يناير 2022م

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Euphemism in Arabic Language: The case with Death Expressions

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Abstract

This article looked at how neutral death related expressions are euphemized in Arabic Language and the reasons behind euphemism as well. The study was qualitative, and the data collected via observation in regional death social gatherings, where people offer condolences. Then, uninstructed interviews were run to randomly chosen people for further analysis and decisions. The findings showed different uses of euphemism so that language users avoid unpleasant reactions, and offer any sort of consideration, solidarity and sympathy to the addresses.

Key words: *euphemism, Arabic Language, death expressions.*

Literature Review

This study is meant to investigate how euphemism in Arabic death expressions works. Euphemism is common phenomenon in Arabic as much as the same with other human languages. The case with death expression is no difference euphemized depending on the situation, and language users euphemize with different phrases. Euphemism is phenomenal in all human languages including Arabic. Farghal (1995) stated that, “the term euphemism comes from Greek euphemism, which means the use of words of good omen”. Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (1995) defined euphemism as, “an expression that is gentler or less direct than the one normally used to refer to something unpleasant or embarrassing”, as in ‘*kick the bucket*’ is an idiomatic and euphemized expression for ‘*die*’. Likewise, Allan and Burridge (1991) modified euphemism as a replacement to dispreferred phrases, and that to save face: either one’s own face or that of the attendees of some third party. By dispreferred expressions, the authors mean expressions that may cause unrest to the interlocutors in the stream of conversation.

Clearly, euphemism is within the frame of politeness theory constraints. Speakers euphemize to maintain positive face when conversing. People tend to show solidarity and concern through positive politeness, and that through the expressions of warmth or friendless. (see Brown 1980). To illustrate,



Arabic users may indicate to the person who died as ‘*almarhum*’ ‘*the person given mercy*’, instead of the neutral ‘*al-mayyit*’ ‘*the deceased*’ and this is usually referred to by the addressee’s relation to the dead. This euphemism is used to avoid the loss of face if the addressee cares for the referent. However; some opt to utilize euphemistic expressions due to social norms so as to offer concerns than to care about the face reaction. Consider this instance from Arabic, *awuu-l-ihtiya:ja:t il-xasah* ‘those with special needs euphemized to the direct expression *al-mu ‘a:qin* ‘the handicapped as a replacement. (Farghal: 2005). Nevertheless, dysphemism is an opposite term to euphemism, where Allan and Burridge defined it as to show offense through expressions to the addressees. (1991).

Euphemism in Arabic Linguistics

Euphemism is common in Arabic, and there are some expressions that they may not make sense if literally translated into other languages without interpretations, such as the word *basiir* ‘sighted’ instead of *?a’ma* ‘blind’. Arabic language is no less euphemistic than other human languages. Euphemism is used on all levels: in literary and non-literary texts; in classical and modern Arabic; written or spoken forms...it is as well as used functionally to make remarks less direct, less blunt or harsh, and to add a kind of politeness to certain expressions to which otherwise seem unpleasant. (Euphemism in Translation: 1999).

According to Alaskaris (1989), euphemism in Arabic is, “*at-talattuf lil-ma?na- lhasan hatta tuhajjinuhu wa-l-mana-lhajjin hatta tuhassinuhu*”. Literally “making the pleasant dialogue objectionable, and making the objectionable pleasant. Farghal (2005) drew a connection between the politeness principle (Leech: 1983), and Grice’s conversational maxim (1975). To further the clarification of their claim, let us consider this instance: *wada? Haddan li-hayaatihi* ‘he put an end to his life’ in replacement of *intahara* ‘he committed suicide’. Both violated the maxim of conversation due to the use of metaphor and the maxim of manner because of conciseness so as to conversationally implicate that his life had been full of sufferings.

Euphemistic Devices in Arabic

For the sake of euphemism, Arabic offers several devices to smooth the discourse. Some of these devices are as following:

Figurative expressions: metaphors are used in natural languages as a euphemistic tool. This device is more used in areas like defecation, urination



and death. Language users euphemize the term *death* in several ways; they tend to apply figurative phrases to indicate the neutral verb *mata* 'to die'. Below is an instance of this device:

Example: *intaqala ila rahmat-i-lah*
Transferred (he) to mercy-GEN-DEF-Allah
"he transferred to the mercy of Allah"

Circumlocution: This is the second most frequent device in Arabic euphemism, where it is used to replace dispreferred expressions or expressions that have bad connotations, and sound offensive to people.

Antonyms: This is used to show sympathy and solidarity with the referents, however; such expressions may cause challenges to understand without interpretation, as in *basiir* 'sighted' is said to a blind instead of the neutral word as *a?ma* 'blind'.

Methods

Qualitative method was adopted to run this study through observation, and random and unplanned interviews. Thus, unselected population is targeted for data collection/analysis. It happened during traditional death gatherings, where people pay condolences to families, relatives and friends. Then, the data elicited was discussed for further analysis of the Arabic euphemism in such contexts. Thus, the study was based on the following research questions:

Why do Arabic language users euphemize death related expressions?

Do Arabic speakers euphemize neutral/direct death expressions?

Participants

Many persons were in the study at different social gatherings relatives do to receive condolences. Males, 20 through 60 years old, were only observed when offering expressions of sympathy. The L1 of these participants is Arabic, and they are from different walks of life so as to be more comprehensive. However, age, gender or any kind were not variables, and do not affect the results.

Procedures

The researcher run observation to social death gatherings in the region, and observed how visitors refer to death expressions when offering condolences. Also, randomly selected informants reached for a follow up interview, and asked for the phrases these informants used with elaboration. The participants were asked to mention the reasons behind the selection of such phrases.



Data Analysis

After the process of data collection via observation and note-taking, the obtained data were double checked for analysis, categorization and assessment according to the level of euphemism. All the notes of the elicited data were matched for further analytic decisions. The expressions were studied, and questioned well to determine the reasons behind avoiding uttering neutral death terms.

Results and Discussion

The overall findings show that mostly all the participants tend to euphemize when it comes to mentioning death related expressions. The transcribed data in this study show that the subjects are on purpose to avoid neutral death expressions when offering condolences; the data showed solidarity and affection for that to lessen the pain and the sufferings of the loss of lovely ones. To further the discussion, some of the participants' arguments for the use of indirect expressions of death is parallel with Allan and Burrige (1991) definition of euphemism as a replacement to dispreferred phrases...

Moreover, language users in the study seem to abide by euphemistic devices mentioned in the literature to not only save face, but also to offer sympathy into the discourse. Some participants claim that they would euphemize a direct expression in order to avoid negative reactions, such as fear or shock to the addressees. Likewise, Ali claimed that euphemism is used functionally to make remarks less direct, less blunt or harsh, and to add a kind of politeness to certain expressions to which otherwise seem unpleasant (1999). Finally, speakers of Arabic are well aware of euphemistic devices, and apply them when necessary really well as the participants showed great consideration, sympathy and comprehension in the discourse. Indeed, the informants showed a positive face especially by their common use of such death expressions: 'X transferred to the mercy of Allah,' 'X passed away.'

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study aimed to explore some Arabic speakers' awareness towards the use of euphemism in the death discourse. As it was hypothesized, many participants reported awareness of euphemism, where the informants' cultural taste, consideration and concern about the feelings of others are shown. Undoubtedly, euphemism should always be drawn to any area in the discourse for that to avoid negative reactions in general.



Lastly, more research should be carried out on the subject matter in all levels/areas.

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