



**A Pragmatic Analysis of English Euphemism and its Application to
Literary Translation: A Case Study of *A Dream of Red Mansions***

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English euphemism is often used in daily communication, where inoffensive words are used to replace the offensive ones so that communication can be harmonized. The word “euphemism” originates in ancient Greek, with “eu” meaning “well, pleasant, good” and “-pheme” meaning “speech, saying.” Thus, the word “euphemism” literally means “pleasant speech”. English euphemism is a way of expressing facts and opinions in the process of social communication. Without a proper use of euphemism, effective communication in English would be difficult or even impossible. This is regarded as the communicative function of English euphemism. Many such examples can also be found in written works. To take literary works as an example, in order to harmonize interpersonal relationships, characters in stories often employ euphemism during their talks. As for the narration part, writers tend to use it as a tool to convey a message for readers to understand. Literary translators, while constrained by the rules of literary translation, should pay special attention to euphemisms in literary works and endeavour to produce proper translations, which requires a study of linguistic devices, pragmatic functions, cultural differences, and other related aspects.

Definition of English euphemism

Researchers have different ideas about the definition of English euphemism, with some listed as follows. Euphemism is considered as “a generally innocuous word or expression used in place of one that may be found offensive or suggest something unpleasant” (Webster’s Online Dictionary). In the book *Fair of Speech* Dennis Joseph Enright indicates that, “Euphemizing is generally defined as substituting an inoffensive or pleasant term for a more explicit, offensive one, thereby veneering the truth by using kind words.” Thus, it can be said that the use of euphemism can make unpleasant things sound better and leave a good impression on listeners in communication.

Formation of English euphemism

Scholars have summarized several linguistic devices that generate euphemism (Guo &

Chang 77-80; Chen 49-50). Basically, five devices contribute to the formation of euphemism which include phonetic, lexical, grammatical, figurative, and pragmatic devices. The phonetic device refers to the method of neglecting or changing the sound of a word. For example, people use 'JC' to replace 'Jesus Christ', 'G-man' for 'garbage men' and 'SAM' for 'surface to air missile.' This can be defined as abbreviation. The lexical device refers to the use of vague expressions, synonyms, and loan words. It is considered to be the most common method to create euphemism. In the sentence 'He is tight with his money' the word 'tight' is used instead of 'frugal' so that the speaker can reach the goal of euphemism. The grammatical device includes negation, ellipsis and other devices in English. "You want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it."¹ This sentence in *Pride and Prejudice* highlights the unwillingness of the speaker to hear it. The writer, Jane Austen, adopts the negation device to express her implied meaning. The figurative device refers to the use of metaphor, analogy, metonymy and periphrasis, etc. That is, if a person is a cleaner, people may say that he is a 'sanitary engineer.' Lastly, the pragmatic device refers to delivering an indirect speech. For example, people say 'Can you close the window?' to indicate the imperative 'Please close the window.' Based on the devices above, it is concluded that participants use these devices to make a polite statement so that the communication is conducted in a better way.

Euphemism and pragmatic functions

Euphemism is introduced on formal and informal occasions to avoid unnecessary embarrassment and to maintain a comfortable atmosphere. Scholars have listed pragmatic functions of euphemism (Zhu 53-55; Lu 89-91; Zhang 51-52). Basically, there are five pragmatic functions including taboo, avoiding vulgarity, concealing, beautification, and humour. For instance, different cultures in different countries lead to the existence of their own linguistic taboo. Thousands of expressions can be found to replace the meaning of "die" such as 'to pass away', 'to be gone to a better place', 'to be with God', 'to be safe in the arms of Jesus', 'to pay the debt of nature', 'to lay down one's life', 'to make the ultimate', and 'to fire one's last shot', etc. Usually old people are gently called 'senior citizens' and old teachers are given the title of 'experienced professors.' In terms of beautification, men usually say a girl is 'slender' or 'slim' to imply she is 'skinny.' If a teacher finds a student cheating in class, she may alternatively say that 'the student is depending on others to do his work.' The purpose of using euphemism in this situation is to avoid the violation of the student's dignity and to educate the student in a positive way. In this way, the student will not feel hurt or discouraged. Concealing means that people change a bad thing into a good one, which can be found especially in political issues because politicians often use it as their political means. For example, during World War II, 'slaughter of the Jews' was called 'depopulation.' Similarly, 'genocide' was taken as 'final solution,' and 'Iraq War' was demonstrated by the US government under the banner of "Free Iraq Operation."

Principles of using English euphemism

¹This is uttered by Mr. Bennet, who feels annoyed while listening to Mrs. Bennet in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.

Based on the analysis of pragmatic functions of English euphemism, scholars argue that they have much to do with and are usually addressed in terms of following two principles: the Cooperative Principle and the Politeness Principle.

The Cooperative Principle

“The American philosopher Paul Grice (1975) noticed that in our daily communication people do not usually say things directly but tend to imply them” (Hu 84-87). Grice explains the Cooperative Principle (CP) on the basis of the argument that speakers and listeners stick to some rules in order to reach their communication goals. Under this principle, you should “make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (Grice 45). In order to explain this theory, he introduces four categories of maxims (quantity, quality, relation, and manner), listed as follows:

- **Quantity Maxim**
 - a. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange)
 - b. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required

- **Quality Maxim**
 - a. Do not say what you believe to be false
 - b. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence

- **Relation Maxim**
 - a. Be relevant

- **Manner Maxim:**
Be perspicuous.
 - a. Avoid obscurity of expression
 - b. Avoid ambiguity
 - c. Be brief (avoid prolixity)
 - d. Be orderly

Based on the definitions and features of euphemism, it can be said that “the pragmatic function of concealing reflects the violation of CP, including the four maxims” (Hu 84-87). In reality, people do not always obey the rules of CP because sometimes they need to express their ideas in an implied way. Other similar examples can be found by using euphemism which violate these principles in mutual communication.

The Politeness Principle

In daily communication people sometimes cannot help violating the CP because they want to avoid hurting others. Thus, the Politeness Principle (PP) was proposed by Geoffrey Leech in 1983. In general there are two aspects to the Politeness Principle:

- To minimize the expression of impolite beliefs.
- To maximize the expression of polite beliefs.

This principle agrees with the communicative function of English euphemism. Leech points out six maxims listed as follows.

- **Sympathy Maxim**
 - a. Minimize antipathy between self and other.
 - b. Maximize sympathy between self and other.

Here comes a paragraph of an article from *New York Times* on June 24, 1974. This example is collected from *A Dictionary of English Euphemisms* edited by Chun Bao Liu in 2002:

The city ordinance passed this spring proclaiming that a 900-foot-long strip of Black's Beach was an "optional swimsuit area" was made possible by a 1972 California Supreme Court ruling that nude sunbathing was not illegal if it took place on beaches secluded from the public view.

"Optional swimsuit area" means a place where people can go nude sunbathing. This is a sensitive topic and some readers may feel uncomfortable when they read this piece of news. Thus, the use of this phrase makes readers feel less offensive when they come across the news coverage.

- **Approbation Maxim**
 - a. Minimize dispraise of other
 - b. Maximize praise of other

For example, if a person is poor, people sometimes tend to use the following adjectives: "needy," "disadvantaged," or "underprivileged." When someone says he is "born on the wrong side of the blanket," it means he is a by-child. By using these words, the speaker aims at minimizing dispraise of others.

- **Modesty Maxim**
 - a. Minimize praise of self
 - b. Maximize dispraise of self

Many examples can be found as evidence in daily life. For example, a husband calls his wife a good and faithful "helpmate." Besides, in ancient Chinese a person uses "犬子" to introduce his son.

- **Generosity Maxim**
 - a. Minimize cost to other
 - b. Maximize cost to self

- **Tact Maxim**
 - a. Minimize benefit to self
 - b. Maximize benefit to other

- **Agreement Maxim**
 - a. Minimize disagreement between self and other
 - b. Maximize agreement between self and other

Use of English euphemism shows its violation of CP and adaptation of PP. Obviously, the occurrence of English euphemism violates CP to some extent, which may induce listeners to consider the implied meaning. In terms of PP, people tend to express facts and opinions in an indirect way.

Research methodology and data collection

The process of data collection is mainly handled in written documents. Online resources are first utilized for research, and then a brief review of previous theoretical studies from journals and dictionaries is undertaken. Some of the data has been used for pragmatic analysis as examples illustrated above. As for research methodology, case study is extremely important with contextual analysis as a central consideration. In order to have a deep understanding of English euphemism and its application to literary translation, one famous Chinese novel and its C-E² translation are to be examined, namely *A Dream of Red Mansions* by Cao Xueqin and Gao E with its English translation by Yang Hsien-Yi and Gladys Yang in 1978. First, a detailed comparison is made between the source and target languages in terms of pragmatic devices and functions. Second, the use of euphemism is examined to see how the characters and the narrators in the literary context violate the Cooperative Principle and adapt to the Politeness Principle. Finally, possible factors are determined towards a cultural understanding of the linguistic phenomena, which may contribute to improving the quality of literary translation especially in the process of translating euphemism data.

Analysis of euphemism and its C-E translation in *A Dream of Red Mansions*

- **A brief introduction**

As is known to all, *A Dream of Red Mansions* narrates the story of an influential Family Jia in the feudal society. There are two young characters in the plot, which include Jia Baoyu and

²Editor's Note (herein after called Ed. N.): Chinese to English translation

Lin Daiyu. The following part of the research consists of three tasks, one for revealing pragmatic functions, another for conducting translation studies, and finally for making a cultural summary.

• **Case One**

不过说黛玉之母如何得病，如何请医服药，如何送死发丧。不免贾母又伤感起来，因说：“我这些儿女，所疼者独有你母，今日一旦先舍我而去，连面不能一见，今见了你，我怎不伤心！”（第三回，P67，下划线为笔者所加）

All the talk now was of Daiyu’s mother. How had she fallen ill? What medicine had the doctors prescribed? How had the funeral and mourning ceremonies been conducted? Inevitably, the Lady Dowager was most painfully affected. “Of all my children I loved your mother best,” she told Daiyu. “Now she has gone before me, and I didn’t even have one last glimpse of her face. The sight of you makes me feel my heart will break!” (Chapter 3, P68, underlined by the author of the paper)

SL	Device	Function	CP	PP	Basis
Chinese	Lexical	Taboo	Violation	Adaptation	Context

TL	Device	Function	CP	PP	Basis
English	Lexical	Taboo	Violation	Adaptation	Context

As is mentioned above, death is a taboo in communication. In order not to mention this affair directly, grammatical device is employed here to achieve the pragmatic function. “Gone” refers to someone’s death, which has the equivalent “去” in ancient Chinese. Also, the speaker says that she could not see her daughter or have her last glimpse. So readers can infer the person’s death from this context. With the contextual factor as the dominant role, the translator tries to carry the message from the source text to the readers of the target text. Here, the literal translation contributes to a successful message transfer, which is acceptable in this situation.

• **Case Two**

转过牌坊，便是又一座宫门，上面横书四个大字，乃是：“孽海情天”。又有一副对联，大书云：

厚地高天，堪叹古今情不尽
痴男怨女，可怜风月债³难偿。（第五回，P132，下划线为笔者所加）

Beyond this archway was a palace gateway with the inscription in large character: Sea of

³“风” literally means wind while “月” refers to the moon.

Grief and Heaven of Love. The bold couplet flanking this reads:

Firm as earth and lofty as heaven, passion from time immemorial knows no end;
Pity silly lads and plaintive maids hard put to it to requite debts of breeze and moonlight.
(Chapter 5, P133, underlined by the author of the paper)

SL	Device	Function	CP	PP	Basis
Chinese	Figurative	Taboo	Violation	Adaptation	Context

TL	Device	Function	CP	PP	Basis
English	Figurative	Beautification	Violation	Adaptation	Context

Similarly, people use “风月债” to refer to debts of love in ancient Chinese. The use of this phrase also violates the Manner Maxim with the purpose of avoiding a direct description of love and sex but Chinese readers can still get the implied meaning. In this case, the author wants to maximize the expression of polite beliefs, which means the adaptation of the Politeness Principle. Although people cannot find its English equivalent, the translator still chooses “breeze and moonlight.” Contextual factor and beautification are the primary reasons. “Pity silly lad” and “plaintive maids” get readers to think about love affairs between man and woman. Also the word “debt” reminds the readers of the complicated relationship between lovers. So in this context, it is natural for them to understand the deep meaning of the phrase although there is no word like “love.” Besides, the use of “breeze and moonlight” reveals a poetic atmosphere which enables the translator to achieve the pragmatic function of beautification due to the features of the English language. That is why the literal translation is used here.

- **Case Three**

贾宝玉初试云雨情⁴刘姥姥一进荣国府（第六回，P164，下划线为笔者所加）

Baoyu Has His First Taste of Love Granny Liu Pays Her First Visit to the Rong Mansion
(Chapter 6, P165, underlined by the author of the paper)

SL	Device	Function	CP	PP	Basis
Chinese	Figurative	Taboo	Violation	Adaptation	Culture

TL	Device	Function	CP	PP	Basis
English	/	/	/	/	Culture

Bassnett and Lefevere argue that the functions of translation lie in two aspects: the target language and the role that the original text plays in the source culture. As a result,

⁴“云雨” originally comes from “巫山云雨”, which literally means “cloud and rain.”

translators should try to achieve a successful translation between the two cultures. In ancient Chinese culture “云雨” (cloud and rain) is related to sexual affairs. That is why they use this phrase to refer to love and sex, which violates the Manner Maxim because the speaker is supposed to avoid obscurity of expression. Obviously, the purpose is to avoid talking about love and sex directly but readers can still get the implicature. In the Chinese culture the use of “cloud and rain” dates back to the story of “巫山云雨” in *Rhapsodies of Gaotang Peak* by Songyu in the Warring States Period. However, its English equivalent cannot be found. It is unacceptable to translate “云雨情” into “love of cloud and rain” because in this way the translator cannot achieve the same function in the target text. As a result, free translation is used here with “Taste of Love”, which focuses on the description of love but sacrifices the consistency of pragmatic function. Although readers can understand its meaning, the taste of using “云雨” has lost its meaning in the target text. This means that the translator has failed to achieve the same pragmatic function of euphemism as the writer does in the source text. The same euphemism cannot be used for cultural reasons.

- **Case Four**

这贾蔷外相既美，内性又聪明，虽应名来上学，不过虚掩耳目而已。仍是斗鸡走狗，赏花玩柳。总恃上有贾珍溺爱，下有贾蓉匡助，因此族中人不敢触逆于他。（第九回，P260，262，下划线为笔者所加）

Jia Qiang was as intelligent as he was handsome, but he attended the school only as a blind for his visits to cock-fights, dog-races and brothels. (Chapter 9, P261, underlined by the author of the paper)

SL	Device	Function	CP	PP	Basis
Chinese	Figurative	Taboo	Violation	Adaptation	Rhetoric

TL	Device	Function	CP	PP	Basis
English	/	/	/	/	/

In ancient Chinese “花” and “柳” invoke sexual associations. The use of this phrase can be looked on as a figurative device. In the translated version, Yang expresses the meaning by using the words “brothels” as there is no equivalent in English. In this way readers can know the exact meaning of this sentence although this method sacrifices the consistency of pragmatic function. However, David Hawks in his translated version in 1975 adopts another image “the Garden of Pleasure” to replace “brothels.” “The Garden of Pleasure” reminds the audience of “the Garden of Eden”, where Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. In this way “the Garden of Pleasure” is compared to a place where people commit sexual activities. From this perspective, this problem may arise due to different cultures and their respective languages. In ancient Chinese culture “斗鸡走狗” and “赏花玩柳” are games and activities for the exploiting classes, as can be found in the original description in *Historical Records* by

Si Maqian (BC145-BC90). As a result, it is very difficult to translate culturally-loaded phrases because there are no equivalents for these linguistic items. These cultural differences need to be recognized first so that the translators can get the message across to readers.

• **Case Five**

凤姐儿答应着就出来了，到了尤氏上房坐下，尤氏道：“你冷眼瞧媳妇是怎么样？”凤姐儿低了半日头，说道：“这个无法了！你也该将一应的东西后事用的，也该料理料理。冲他一冲也好。”尤氏道：“我也暗暗的叫人预备了。就是那件东西，不得好木头，暂且慢慢的办罢。”（第十一回，P307，下划线为笔者所加）

Promising to do so, Xifeng left. She went to sit with Madam You who asked, “Tell me frankly, how did you find her?” Xifeng lowered her head for a while. “There seems to be little hope,” she said at last. “If I were you I’d make ready the things for the funeral. That may break the bad luck.” “I’ve had them secretly prepared. But I can’t get any good wood for you know what, so I’ve let that go for the time being.”(Chapter 11, P308, underlined by the author of the paper)

SL	Device	Function	CP	PP	Basis
Chinese	Grammatical	Taboo	Violation	Adaptation	Grammar

TL	Device	Function	CP	PP	Basis
English	/	/	/	/	Grammar

In this case, “后事”, “冲一冲” and “那件东西” are translated into “funeral”, “break the bad luck,” and “you know what,” respectively. In the target text the translator just uses “funeral” to express death so that the meaning is clear. Therefore, free translation is applied here without adopting euphemism. Besides, one point that needs to be picked up is that in the process of translation the grammatical equivalence is supposed to be achieved. “后事” and “那件东西” are noun forms while “冲一冲” is a verbal phrase. So the translator strives for keeping the same part of speech in the target text, which is also very important in literary translation. However, in actual situations people cannot always achieve the ideal goal. In this case, free translation is adopted when encountered with expressions characteristic of distinctive Chinese cultures.

• **Case Six**

谁知近日水月庵的智能私逃进城，找至秦钟家下，看视秦钟，不意被秦业知觉，将智能逐出，将秦钟打了一顿，自己气的老病发了，三五日光景便呜呼死了。（第十六回，P402，下划线为笔者所加）

Now, a few days previously, Zhineng had stolen away from Water Moon Convent and come

to town to look for Qin Zhong in his home. He had been caught by his father, who drove her away and gave his son a beating. The old man's rage had brought on an attack of his chronic disorder, and within a few days he was dead. (Chapter 16, P403, underlined by the author of the paper)

Here, “呜呼死了” is considered to be a Chinese interjection without any equivalent in English. Other similar phrases like “呜呼哀哉”, “寿终正寝” and “一命呜呼” also share the same meaning. For this reason, Yang just translates “呜呼死了” into “he was dead.” This can also be ascribed to the cultural factor.

- **Discussions and findings**

After the analysis of six cases in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, it can be concluded that English euphemism is used for pragmatic purposes, which should also be shown and represented in its translated version. By examining the source text and the target text in terms of its pragmatic functions, a better evaluation can be achieved. In addition, it is necessary to recognize the inconsistency of pragmatic functions in the translation of euphemism due to the cultural differences between the two languages.

Based on the analysis of English euphemism in the data, the following factors exert a great influence upon translating euphemism, including grammar, lexis, rhetoric, context, and most importantly, culture. Grammatical factor requires translators to emphasize the construction of words and sentences while lexical factor refers to the vocabulary choice for creating euphemism and its translation. A good command of the target language lies in its fluent use of lexical items, which is a challenge for translators. Rhetorical factor can be seen in euphemism because speakers usually avoid telling the truth directly. Above all, translators should realize that the difficulty of translating euphemism results from cultural differences. Meanwhile, a solid grasp of its pragmatic functions benefits literary translation while dealing with culturally-loaded contents, some suggestions are as follows: first of all, translators should try to transfer the euphemism from the source language to the target language as the ideal goal. They are supposed to bear in mind the significance of contextual factors and identify the corresponding connotations; second, they should also pay attention to the skills applicable to the translated works especially under the literary context, which are intended for achieving a culturally-bound translation; third, if the implicature of euphemism can be kept in the target language, literal translation should be employed; fourth, as for difficulties caused by culture, translators may think of another similar image to replace the euphemism in the source language. Otherwise, they have to give up the use of euphemism and approach free translation for expression. Finally, as euphemism is a linguistic phenomenon as well as a cultural one, translators should understand the culture of the source language and the target language, which is of great help towards the improvement of the translation quality.

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