

Exploring the use of euphemisms in some speeches of president Obama: a pragmatic study

Huda Yaseen Abdul Wahid

Cihan University-Erbil

Abstract:

This study is an attempt to figure out how euphemism is employed in speeches of the president Barak Obama. It will focus first on euphemism in general. Then, it will try to find out how some euphemistic expressions have been used to cover up the truth and help the speaker to be polite. It also attempts to pinpoint how these euphemistic expressions affect the audience and their mind. It will analyze these political speeches from the pragmatic perspective: politeness principle.

الملخص:

ان هذا البحث يهدف الى الكشف عن كيفية تضمين التعابير اللطيفة في خطابات الرئيس اوباما بالتركيز اولا على التعابير اللطيفة بشكل عام و من ثم الكشف عن كيفية استخدامها اتغطية الحقيقة و مساعدة المتحدث بان يظهر بالشكل اللطيف. كما انه يسعى الى معرفة تاثير استخدام مثل هذه التعابير اللطيفة على رأي الجمهور تفكيرهم. سوف يتم تحليل خطابات الرئيس اوباما من منظور تداولي وهو مبدا اللطف

1.Introduction:

Communication is not only a matter of exchanging talks but also a matter of being polite and knowing how to send the message without affecting the face of the interlocutor. In the course of communication, speakers often face cognitive dissonance inducing situations in which there is a need to choose between referring to something directly or relieving someone of some responsibility by sacrificing semantic transparency and letting hearers infer the true meaning (Cumhuk,2010). The very existence of sharp straightforward words that may inspire fear of supernatural forces such as death will automatically trigger a quest for euphemism, i.e. alternatives that do not arouse abomination, revulsion or dread (Al-Kharabsheh, 2011). Euphemisms are used when one wants to name things without calling up a mental picture of them. The aim of using euphemisms is to strike at a person's imagination. Euphemisms do not form complete pictures in the mind, nor do they completely define an event or object. Without a complete definition, the ability to understand the true meaning of a statement is obscured (Mihás, n.d). Therefore, sometimes using euphemisms is a good way of deceiving people and not telling the truth. They also function as powerful linguistic tools to smooth communication and preserve interpersonal relationships in non-hostile verbal encounters. Thus, euphemism undoubtedly constitutes a faithful linguistic politeness marker within the approach followed by Lakoff (1973), Leech(1983), Brown and Levinson(1987) who favour indirectness as an ideal behaviour for mitigating conflictive situations and insuring the mutual protection of face (Eliecer, 2005). Therefore, "euphemisms are powerful linguistic tools that are embedded so deeply in our language that few of us , even those who pride themselves on being plainspoken, ever get through a day without using them"(as cited by Linfoot-Ham, 2005). Different contexts demand widely different vocabularies when addressing sensitive issues that may cause a feeling of pain for others; in this case, it is important to choose words and expressions that avoid naming things directly or sugar-coat ideas. This is the purpose of euphemism (Al-Hamad & Al-Shunnaq,2011).

1.1 The pragmatic functions of euphemism

The pragmatic functions of euphemism are included in taboo, polite, covering up, inducing , tactical, and humor functions(["http://eng.hi138.com/?i50545#"](http://eng.hi138.com/?i50545#)).

Taboo functions: from the origin of euphemism, we can see that taboo is the first function of euphemism. Euphemism has been used for a long time, and it is closely related to taboo. When

people try to avoid and give up taboo words, they have to find another word to replace this vacancy at the same time. Hence people have created euphemism.

Polite function:

The polite function of euphemism is to avoid inelegant things and make people feel pleasant. People refer to vagueness when meet some unpleasant things or behaviour in order to avoid making offence or hurting other's feeling.

Covering up function:

Covering up function is withholding information. Western political life gives birth to euphemism. Some politicians and news media have made good use of the vagueness of euphemism to cover up the facts of some events for the purpose of making the politics, economy and military more steady.

Inducing function:

Sometimes, people use euphemism to make their statement more persuasive. Thus the cosmetic words have a special communicative function, which is called inducing function. For example, airline companies divide the grades of passenger compartments into three ranks. They use "deluxe" or "premium class" to replace "first class". The second class is transformed into "first class". The third class is revised as "business class" or "tourist class". They sound more pleasing.

Tactical function:

If the same meaning is expressed in many different ways, their effects are entirely different. This is what researchers called the art of speaking. If they apply this strategy to their daily life, their life will be more colourful. For example, on the plane, there are some bags that can be used by the passengers to shoot his cookies. People don't print the words 'vomit bag' on the surface of the bag. Instead, they use the words 'for motion discomfort'. The result proved that the vomit phenomenon has reduced, because compared with the former words, the word 'for motion discomfort' prevents the passengers from vomiting when in a state of airsickness. This is the tactical function of euphemism

Humor function: Jocular euphemism has been used to help people face the fact more easily. For example, people use 'push up daisies' to take place of 'be buried' because the former words can reduce people's horror towards death. There are two kinds of euphemisms: conscious and unconscious. Unconscious euphemisms are conventionally developed as euphemisms and it is

difficult to recall their original motivations. Conscious euphemisms in the course of a speech come across intelligibly in a figurative manner as in political language and advertising. For instance, the government spokesman says "redeployment of troops" meaning withdrawal. Politicians in general select words with care to make lies truths and seem respectable (Al-Qadi, 2009). Therefore, politicians tend to use euphemistic expressions to save their face and not deform their picture in people's minds. Dong (2010) says that one of the features of political euphemisms is vagueness. That is, when talking about American army's invasion into Grenada in 1983, President Reagan was quite dissatisfied with the word "invasion" used by the journalists, instead, he expressed it as "a rescue mission", glorifying their military invasion as their help offer to other countries. Besides, euphemistic expressions generally characterize discourse in public relations and politics, where it is sometimes referred to as double speak and is equated to politeness (Al-Quran & Al-Azzam, 2009). Doublespeak is the language that pretends to communicate but really does not. It is the language that makes bad seem good, the negative appear positive, the unpleasant appear attractive or at least tolerable (Lutz, 1989). Using euphemistic expressions in political discourse is one of the methodologies that politicians and policy makers follow in order to convey their message in the least offensive manner. In *"Politics and English language"*, George Orwell says "Political language is...designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind". During the Second World War, Nazi Germany uses a large number of political euphemisms to cover the truth such as, *rukkehr unerwünscht* (means return unwanted, to kill), *strategic camp* (means concentration camp). The function of euphemism is to protect the speaker/writer, hearer/reader, or all of them from possible effrontery and offence, in other words, to be polite. He Ziran (1988) defines politeness principle as follows: when communicating, speakers always try to meet the convenience of others and put themselves at disadvantage in order to make both feel respected and win the favour of the other party (as cited by Chen, 2010). This is related to the notion of "face" proposed by Brown and Levinson. Brown and Levinson (1987) say to be polite is to be face-caring. Face and politeness hold a means-to-end relation between them. Since face is vulnerable to face threatening acts (FTAs), it is politeness that anoints their performance to reduce, at least superficially, their poignancy so that face is made less vulnerable. Leech (1983: 83-84) distinguishes relative politeness from absolute politeness. Relative politeness highlights the fact that politeness is a norm of behaviour which is for a particular

setting regarded as typical. Absolute politeness is seen as a scale or rather a set of scales, having a negative and a positive pole. At the negative pole is negative politeness consisting of minimizing the impoliteness of impolite illocutions. At the positive pole is positive politeness consisting of maximizing the politeness of polite illocutions. Leech's maxims of the politeness principle tend to go in pairs as follows:

- A. Tact Maxim (in impositives and commissives)
 - a) Minimise cost to other;
 - b) Maximize benefit to other.
- B. Generosity Maxim (in impositives and commissives)
 - a) Minimize benefit to self;
 - b) Maximize cost to self.
- C. Approbation Maxim (in expressive and assertive)
 - a) Minimize dispraise of others;
 - b) Maximize praise of other
- D. Modesty maxim (in expressive and assertive)
 - a) Minimize praise of self
 - b) Maximize dispraise of self
- E. Agreement Maxim (in assertive)
 - a) Minimize disagreement between self and other;
 - b) Maximize agreement between self and other
- F. Sympathy Maxim
 - a) Minimize antipathy between self and other;
 - b) Maximize sympathy between self and other

(as cited by Chen, 2010)

2. Research aims and methodologies:

This research aims at analyzing President Obama's speeches following politeness principles identified above to answer the following questions:

- 1) Why do politicians tend to use euphemistic strategies in their speeches?
- 2) How are these euphemistic strategies employed in their speeches?
- 3) Are these euphemistic strategies effective in affecting people's minds and opinions?

The analysis will be accomplished using Leech's maxims of the politeness principle mentioned previously. We will see how president Obama has used euphemistic strategies that go along these maxims and what the main maxims that have been used extensively.

3. Research findings:

After analyzing six speeches delivered by President Obama over the last four years, it has been found that tact, approbation, and sympathy maxims prevail in his speeches. These speeches almost always focus on the war against Iraq, the decision behind waging it, and the sacrifices provided by the American people to achieve the determined goals behind this war. Since the research's aim is to find out the main euphemistic expression, the selected speeches have been chosen.

3.1 Tact Maxim and Euphemism:

Tact maxim is a basic maxim of politeness principle. It requires cutting down or not expressing the bad points for others. It tries to ornament the truth by justifying for our false decisions and actions under the umbrella of helping others and sacrificing ourselves for others' benefit. It is embedded in impositive and commissive speech acts. Impositive speech act takes place when the speaker asks the hearer to perform an action. The commissive speech act takes place when the speaker commits himself to a future course of action, promise, pledge, swear, vow, or guarantee. In the speeches of president Obama, we have seen the manifestation of this maxim strongly. For example, in his speech about his war in Iraq he has said ".... I would like to talk to you about the end of our **combat mission**, the ongoing security **challenges** we face, and the need to rebuild our nation here at home..."(CNN. Sep.1st, 2010). He refers to the war in Iraq as a combat mission and to the difficulties and obstacles as challenges. By doing so, he uses a vague euphemism to justify for the war in Iraq claiming that it was a mission and he was chosen to accomplish it. We can also understand from this lexical substitution that he has done this for the benefit of Iraqis at the expense of his nation. Therefore, he is maximizing benefit to others and minimizing cost to them. Another example of tact maxim, "... Indeed one of the lessons of our efforts in Iraq is that America's influence around the world is not a function of military force alone. [...] to secure our **interests** and stand by our **allies**."(August, 31st, 2010). He has used interests instead of referring frankly to America's interests in Iraq's oil. He has also used allies to refer to those Arab countries who stood by America in its war against Iraq. Another example, "[...] It should also serve as a **message** to the world that the united states of America intends to sustain and strengthen our leadership in this **young** country."(August, 31st, 2010). We can notice the implied threat in this vague euphemism "message", to show his intention to stay in

Iraq and commit himself to such an action in any other “young” country to achieve peace. At the same time, he is justifying for America’s troops in Iraq to help Iraqis. As a result, he is minimizing cost to others and maximizing benefit to them. Another example has been quoted from Obama’s speech on Nov.20th, 2006 is “The second part of our strategy[...] that puts Iraqi security forces in the lead, **intensifies and focuses our efforts to train** those forces, and expands the number of our personnel and other special forces who are deployed with Iraqis as **units advisers**”. Similar to what I have showed above, the previous example represents American troops as advisers and the Iraqi ones as interns that are in need of training. By using these euphemistic expressions, he is minimizing cost to others and maximizing benefit to them.

3.2 Generosity Maxim and Euphemism:

Generosity maxim is a politeness principle. It is similar to the tact maxim in that it takes place in impositive and commissive speech acts. However, it tends to minimize benefit to self and maximizing cost to self. President Obama, in one of his speeches, tries to justify for America’s interference in Iraq and Afghanistan. He has said “[...] they knew our power grows through its prudent use; our security emanates from the justness of our cause... we are the keepers of this legacy. Guided by these principles once more, we can meet those **new threats** that demand even **greater effort**- even greater cooperation and understanding between nations. We will begin reasonably leave Iraq to its people, and forge a **hard-earned** peace in Afghanistan.”(20th January 2009). As we can see, president Obama has used a vague euphemism to point out the danger of Al-Qaeda and the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Another example, president Obama has said concerning the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq “[...] We should send a clear message to the Iraqis that we won’t be there forever, and by the next year our primary role should be to **conduct counter-insurgency** actions, **train Iraqi security forces**, and **provide needed logistical support**.”(June 21st 2006). He has used these lexical substitutions to pledge to stay in Iraq but for the sake of helping Iraqis to do the reforms. He has not said directly that America will stay in Iraq even after the withdrawal to watch closely the political life there. Another example that shows the same pledge for staying in Iraq is, “The three basic goals that should drive our Iraq policy: that is, 1) **stabilizing** Iraq and giving the factions within Iraq the space they need to forge a political settlement;2) containing and ultimately **defeating the insurgency** in Iraq; and 3) bringing our troops safely home.” (June 21st 2006). He is in advance justifying for

the existence of American troops in Iraq for the alleged purpose to help it. By doing so, he is minimizing benefit to self and maximizing cost to self.

3.3 Approbation Maxim and Euphemism:

Approbation maxim is a polite principle that takes place in expressive and assertive speech acts. Expressive speech act is an act in which a speaker expresses an attitude to or about a state of affairs. It includes apology, appreciation, congratulation, deploring, detesting, regretting, thanking, and welcoming. The assertive speech act commits a speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition, e.g. reciting a creed. This maxim is embedded in minimizing dispraise of others and maximizing praise of others. For example, President Obama in one of his speeches has congratulated Iraqis and thanked American troops using these euphemistic expressions to hide the truth could be seen obviously on the ground as follows: “The Americans who have served in Iraq **completed every mission** they were given. They **defeated** a regime that had **terrorized its people. Together with Iraqis and coalition partners** who made huge sacrifices of their own” (August 31st, 2010). President Obama has also kept praising Iraqi forces as it is obvious in the following” [...] and because of the **resilience of the Iraqi people**, Iraq has the opportunities to embrace a new destiny[...] And **Iraq forces have taken the fight to Al-Qaeda**, removing much of its leadership in Iraq-led operation”. Therefore, using “resilience” to refer to the flexibility of Iraqis to embrace a new destiny written by the American policy. By doing so, he is maximizing praise of Iraqis and minimizing dispraise of them.

3.4 Sympathy Maxim and Euphemism:

Sympathy maxim is also a politeness maxim that leads to minimize antipathy between self and others and maximize sympathy between self and others. This maxim has been used heavily in Obama’s speeches. For example, in one of his speeches on the memorial day he has said “to those who mourn **the loss of a loved one**, my heart breaks [...] This day is about the **fallen heroes** that you loved[...]We memorize our **first patriots** who never knew the independence they won with their lives. We memorialize the armies of men and women disguised as men[...] We memorialize those who gave their lives on the battlefields of our times”(30th May 2011). He has used these lexical substitution to refer to those dead soldiers and console their relatives. By doing so, he is maximizing sympathy with Americans who were upset due to the increasing

number of casualties during the war. Another example, “**we** must tackle those challenges at home with as much energy , and girt, and sense of **common purpose** as **our men and our women** in uniform have served abroad” (September 1st, 2010). As we notice, President Obama has used “we” to refer to all Americans as if they all are equal in making any decision serving their country. By doing so, he is sympathizing with them and telling them indirectly that they themselves are responsible for what happened during the war in Iraq.

3.5 Modesty Maxim and Euphemism:

Modesty maxim is a politeness principle that occurs in expressive and assertive speech acts. It commits the speaker to minimize praise of self and maximize dispraise of self. President Obama, in his speech about the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq, has said “[...] That policy-by-slogan will no longer pass as an acceptable form of debate in this country.” **Mission accomplished,” “cut and run,” “stay the course”** the American people have determined that all these phrases have become **meaningless** in the face of a conflict that grows more deadly and chaotic with each passing day... The notion that Iraq would **quickly and easily become a bulwark of flourishing democracy in the Middle East** was not a plan for victory, but an **ideological fantasy**” (20th November 2006). He has used these lexical substitutions to minimize the size of efforts that Americans paid for the favour of Iraqis since the conflict is increasing. On the other hand, he has said that the decision of going to Iraq was not just a plan of victory but an ideological fantasy which means that America has spent a lot of efforts and it will continue its efforts until terrorists are defeated. Another example, President Obama has said in one of his speeches “ An **increase** in the quality and quantity of U.S. personnel [...] can **guard against** militia infiltration of Iraqi units; **develop the trust** and goodwill of Iraqi soldiers and the local populace” . He has meant that America will take the responsibility of preventing any infiltration of Iraqi units. Besides, he has also shed light on Iraqi positive features like trust and goodwill. By doing so, he is maximizing dispraise of self and minimizing praise of self.

3.6 Agreement Maxim and Euphemism:

Agreement maxim is a politeness principle which takes place in assertive speech acts that commit a speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition, e.g. reciting a creed . This maxim tends to minimize antipathy between self and others and maximize sympathy between self and

others. After reviewing the selected speeches of president Obama, we have not seen clearly that President Obama has said clearly “we agree with or disagree with”. However, we have seen the following “To the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect”(20th January 2009). We can figure out that America and the Muslim world have something in common which are making money from the oil and the existence of American troops to keep peace.

4. Conclusion:

To sum up what we have done through this research, we can see that the analysis of President Obama's speeches has disclosed the strong existence of politeness maxims especially the tact and approbation maxims embedded in euphemistic expressions. These euphemistic expressions are loaded with two maxims which minimize cost to other; maximize benefit to other, and minimize dispraise of other; maximize praise of other respectively were repeated many times. This reflects the picky nature of Obama's speeches. That is, he has tended not to affect the receivers' face negatively. Besides, the sympathy maxim prevails in his speeches to show the sympathetic sense of his speeches especially for the families of those who lost their lives in the Iraqi war. Also, we have seen the existence of the modest maxim which tends to minimize praise of self and maximize dispraise of self. He tends to keep praising others and pretending what America has done and it is still doing is its duty towards the world. By doing so, he has appointed himself as the implementer of the mission of spreading peace everywhere and hiding America's own interests in the Arab world to capture the Arab oil. For this reason, we cannot see any obvious statement for agreement as if they themselves should agree with America since it is the initiator of all plans which tends to help human beings.

References:

- Al-Hamad,M.,Q., & Al-Shunaq, M.,A.,(2011). 'Emotive Expressions in President Bashar Al-Assad's Political Speeches with an Eye to Translation.' In *Onoma'zein* Vol.23 (2011/1): 149-170
- Al-Kharabsheh,A.,(2011). 'Arabic Death Discourse in Translation: Euphemism and Metaphorical Conceptualization in Jordanian Obituaries.' In *Across Languages and Cultures* Vol. 12 (1), pp. 19-48 (2011)
- Al-Azzam, M., and Al-Quran,B., (2009). Euphemism in Jordanian Political Discourse: a Pragmatic and Translational Perspective. *International Journal of Communication*, 19,27-46
- Al-Qadi, N.S.,(2009). 'A sociolinguistic Comparison of Euphemisms in English and Arabic.' In *J. King Saud Univ.*, Vol. 21, Lang. & Transl., pp. 13-22, Riyadh.
- Cumhuk,A.,N., (2011). Conventionality and manipulative potential of euphemism in discourse
- Chen, P.,(2010).On Pragmatic Strategies for Avoidance of Explicitness in Language. *Asian Social Science*, Vol.6, No.10.
- Dong,J.,(2010). 'Study on the features of English political euphemism and its social functions.' In *English Language Teaching.*, Vol.3 No. 1
- Eliecer,C.F.(2005). Euphemistic Strategies in Politeness and Face Concernc.' In *pagmalinguistica* 13, 77-86
- Linfoot-Ham,K.(2005). "the Linguistics of Euphemism: a Diachronic Study of Euphemism Formation." *Journal of Language and Linguistics* Vol.4 No.2.
- Leech, G.,(1983), *Principles of Pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- Mihas, E. 2005. Non-literal language in political discourse. LSO Working Papers in Linguistics 5: Proceedings of WIGL 2005 (pp. 124-139). Available online: <<http://ling.wisc.edu/lso/wpl/5.1/LSOWP5.1-10-Mihas.pdf>>
- Orwell,G(1978) "Political Euphemism," in Escholz, P., Rosa, A. and Clark, V. (Eds.) (1978) *Language Awareness*. New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc.
- From the pragmatics of politeness in English euphemism. (2008, May 22). Retrieved on October 1st from <http://eng.hi138.com/?i50545#>

