



Euphemisms as Cultural and Social Phenomenon: Cross- Cultural Contrastive Study of English and Albanian Euphemistic Expressions

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ABSTRACT

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Euphemisms have been traditionally viewed as social taboos operative within the language-community and specifically as being “isolated” into their historical contexts and the established cultural conditions. Euphemisms help us to understand how taboo topics are conceived in cultural groups and what beliefs are accepted, rejected, or implicitly legitimated. Indeed, it is the social and cultural nature of euphemisms that make them so changing over time and across societies. Different cultural backgrounds have reflected various views and attitudes towards delicate and touching issues such as taboos. In this context Albanian and English communities as distinguishable culturally identified societies have in an original and unrepitive way designated the linguistic material in the process of euphemistic expressions generation and embedment. This contrastive analysis aims at investigating the way superstitious and social taboos have given rise to several types of euphemisms in both languages, linguistic materials which should be explained based on social cultural and mental grounds and peoples’ general belief that there is a somehow supernatural and instinctive hidden link between the linguistic sign and the referent it represents. At this point, it seems that Albanian and English communities have not “suffered” from similar unexplained fears, doubts, insecurities, and irrationalities. It is more than evident that while consulting the euphemistic corpus of Albanian and English euphemisms, distinguishable differences can be spotted.

KEYWORDS:

euphemisms, taboos, superstitions, historical and cultural background, contrastive study

There is a specific group of words in every language which people historically used to avoid and because they are regarded as being rude, harsh, disrespectful impolite or too directly addressed. The term euphemism itself is used to denote words which because of the very nature of the referents they are associated to are described as being roundabout means of expression. Euphemisms can be also viewed as social taboos operative within the language-community, such that the use of particular words indicates membership of specific groups within the community. The role played by social taboos in language is that they do affect the expressive and social meanings of lexeme. As John Lyons states “Diachronic investigation of the vocabulary have shown how important a factor euphemism- the avoidance of tabooed words-have been in changing the descriptive meaning of words” [Lyons 1981; 151]

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Taboo expressions are usually culturally defined as socially accepted labelled straightforward terms. Antrushina views euphemisms as devices dictated by social conventions which are sometimes apt to be oversensitive where there is none and seek refinement in absurd avoidances and pretentiousness. [Antrushina 2004; 114]. Alan and Burrigde emphasise the fact that “linguistic expressions are cultural and social by-products, that is why the way people use euphemisms are a direct, immediate reflection of social and national factors” [Alan & Burrigde 1991; 5]

Euphemisms should be firstly surveyed as being “isolated” into their historical contexts and the established cultural conditions

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 (Rawson 1981, 1). The need to generate and elaborate the euphemistic spectrum has been stimulated by the need to use freely and to discuss broadly about the so-called “touchy” and taboo subject without enraging, insulting or humiliating other people while

Dr. Alda Jashari (Cicko), Euphemisms as Cultural and Social Phenomenon: Cross- Cultural Contrastive Study of English and Albanian Euphemistic Expressions

taking care about interpersonal communication and maintenance of civilised relationships. Holder emphasises the point that in speech and writing, we use euphemisms when dealing with taboos or sensitive subjects. It is therefore also the language of evasion, hypocrisy, of prudery, and of deceit. (Holder 1995 :6) and in turns they can be used due to genuine concern not to hurt someone's feelings.

Euphemisms help us to understand how taboos are conceived in cultural groups and what beliefs are accepted, rejected, or implicitly legitimated. Indeed, it is the social and cultural nature of euphemisms that make them so changing over time and across societies.

Different cultural backgrounds and distinguishable mentality related reflections have dictated and conditioned the various views and attitudes towards delicate and touching issues such as taboos. In this context Albanian and English communities have had a specifically different historical background which has in a dominant way conditioned the way these distinguishable culturally identified societies have in an original and unrepentive way designated the linguistic material in the process of euphemistic expressions generation and embedment.

Superstitious and social taboos which have historically given rise to several types of euphemisms should be explained based on social cultural and mental grounds and peoples' general belief that there is a somehow supernatural and instinctive hidden link between the linguistic sign and the referent it represents. People have always overestimated the power of words and the subconsciousness fear lying underneath the careful avoidance of directly addressing the word has been transformed in one of the most powerful linguistic tools Albanian and English language speaking communities have ever generated.

A contrastive analysis of Albanian and English euphemisms related to superstitions and taboos

Euphemisms, more than any other lexical unit, are deeply rooted in the collective consciousness and are full indicators and incarnates of the connections of the speakers with the realia they should nominate and demonstrate full evidence of time mentality and cultural divisions. Euphemisms are usually viewed as a type of linguistic choice emanated from the oral speech regional and dialectical figurative language. Historically traced in an early stage of the human society development and usually endowed with cultural characteristics, the euphemistic expressions related to taboos and superstitions occupy a considerable place. At this point, it seems that Albanian and English communities have not "suffered" from similar unexplained fears, doubts insecurities and irrationalities. It is more than evident that while consulting the euphemistic corpus of Albanian and English euphemisms, distinguishable differences can be spotted.

Euphemisms related to wild or dangerous animals, serious diseases and supernatural inexplicable forces have resulted to be far more productive and evidently have generated an overwhelming number of Albanian euphemisms. As it can be noted it seems that Albanian speaking community has constantly believed that the linguistic sign is not only a symbol used for the purpose of nomination, but something deeper and more profoundly rooted in the very nature of the referent, according to their general belief, the words' avoidance would mitigate or even disappear the realia evident danger or misfortune. Statistically speaking, the linguistic varieties that have produced the greatest number of euphemistic expressions are those related to animals such as **wolf, snake, ringlet, fox, ant**. The greatest number of euphemisms used to replace the names of dangerous animals are related to wolves, snakes, and ringlets.

The snake has anciently been considered as a totem for Illyrians, the ancestors of Albanian and this object of worship is still active and vivid in many parts of North Albania. 96 Albanian euphemistic expressions related to the animal "snake" demonstrate peculiar lexical and semantic values and present to a great extend structural and conceptual variety. These lexical units present noticeable diversity in terms of numerical data as well as regional and dialectical connotative embedment. An equal extension and use on both Albanian dialects emphasise once more a striking permanent feature of Albanian language, vivid and powerful word formation ability.

The process of the elaboration of these units has been accompanied by striking figurative semantic expansion mostly due to the embedment of metaphor, metonymy. At this point a considerable expansion of words' semantic structure can be surveyed. The denotational ability of "the signifier" is intensively accompanied by expressive and stylistic values as in **bizele, buba, sfurk, fier, buci, gjylpani, kulaci, farkaci etj.**

In some cases, the deduction of these units has emerged from the identification of regional natural and physical conditions this realia generally lives in such as **ai i dheut, ai i gardhit, ai i shkambit, ai i tokës, ai i përronjve, ai i pronit, ai i shkambit, ai i shullamit.**

The typology of lexical choice in several cases is grounded on some external realia indicators, evident characteristics or essential traits usually related to this referents' appearance or the danger it usually presents as in **i larmi, laramani, laramanlivadhi, i gjati, i helmuemi, laroshi, i përdredhuni, bishtcungu, kamshkurtri, damtori, i zivi, kulaci, kambëfshhuri**

Causative composites with euphemistic value and function occupy a noticeable place in the vivid and productive tapestry of euphemistic units. **Gojëlidhuri, gojëmylluri, gojëmbërthyeri, gojëngrimi, gojëqepuni, gojëthati, gojëfarkuemi, gojëngurti** are some examples.

Dr. Alda Jashari (Cicko), Euphemisms as Cultural and Social Phenomenon: Cross- Cultural Contrastive Study of English and Albanian Euphemistic Expressions

Another ancient taboo closely related to everyday pastoral life and traditions as well as to specific regional and environmental conditions is the wolf. In ancient Albanian popular superstition, it was absolutely forbidden to “call it by its own name”. That is why 50 euphemistic expressions have been produced by Albanian speaking community. Large extended synonymic lines for the animal wolf demonstrate a high degree of lexical and semantic productivity usually based on vivid figurative metaphorical transferences, curiously enough usually implied and hyperbolised as in *qafëgjati, veshcurri, i gjati, qafëtrashi, i madhi, zullapi*.

Albanians isolated and protective mentality has in this case accomplished the mere euphemistic function that of smoothly diminish the danger and draw near the realia if impossibly facing destroying or making it disappear. These examples indicate this lexical choice *këmbëlehti, shpirtmiri, shpirtndrituri, i miri, i vogli*.

Causative composed nouns with euphemistic function are also conceived. *Gojëshelni, gojëzëni, gojëfërkuemi, gojëlidhuni, gojëzëni, gojëngrimi* Another somehow mystically perceived animal is the weasel. 39 euphemistic items are recorded in Albanian regional lexicon and popular oral speech. Analysing the semantic structure of these units, it can be surveyed that the mostly used euphemisms are mostly related to the external characteristics of the realia and apparently indicating a general tendency of Albanian general belief that the identification of the positive traits if this animal would diminish the actual risks this referent would impose. *e bukura, bukuri, bukulicë, bukulushkë, bukuria e minjve, e bukura e dheut, e bukura e zogjve, bukurezë, buklezë*.

In ancient primitive peoples' belief, Albanians believed in the transformation of a woman in *nuselale* therefore this mystic figure vested with fear and mystery used to be named *nusebukur, nusja e minjve, nusja e mirë, nusmira, nusëza, nusja e djemve*.

Of a great interest for our analysis are the dialectical and regional synonymic lines linguistically materialized based on the indicators of some striking features exclusively related to the colour or the tail of the realia such as *bishtfurka, bishtfurbukura, larakuqe, pikaloshe, shtatpikaloshe etc*.

On the contrary, English language has a highly limited number of euphemisms related to this type of taboos. “The dictionary of euphemisms How not to say what you mean” by R.W. Holder has not recorded any example of euphemistic expressions related to any animal. Whereas in the compilation “A dictionary of euphemisms and other doublespeak” by H.A. Rawson only two euphemisms related to animals respectively **donkey** and **bear** are recorded. The explanation for the word *donkey* can be motivated on purely personal subjective bases, this word is similarly articulated with the word Duncan and presumably this could have been one of the proper noun farmers used to call their animals. On the other hand, surprisingly enough, in Scotland the

traditional noun *ass* was conserved and parallelly the noun *cuddie* with reference to the anthroponym Cuthbert. In case of male donkeys, the use of the word *ass* results in some duplicated variants such as *jackasses* or *jackacks*. Other euphemisms for this word are *arse* and *bottom*. [Rawson 1981, 80]

The bear is the another alternatively nominated animal in English. Referring to same source “A dictionary of euphemisms and other doublespeak” English people have linguistically materialized these euphemistic units *little old man, dear uncle, the wise one, honey-paw, broad-foot*.

Albanian and English euphemisms related to death

Death has traditionally perceived in many cultures as a departure, as an eternal journey or as a relief from natural human sorrows and misery. Both English and Albanian communities have elaborated extensive examples of euphemistic expressions, all identified by striking stylistic and emotional values. A variety of euphemisms related to this taboo have derived from an abstract perception determined by an indispensable need not to hurt peoples' feelings, a sense of respect and empathy for the one who is dead, and mixed feelings of fear and insecurities of a natural destiny no one can escape from. At this point both cultures have generated a considerable number of euphemistic units carefully and emotionally embedded in highly figurative expressions.

Statistically speaking, according to two dictionary compilations of euphemisms in Albanian “Taboos and euphemisms in Albanian language” by Osmani and Pepa and “Dictionary of jargons and Albanian euphemisms” by Ibrahim, 72 euphemistic expressions are recorded to be related to death. Albanian euphemisms have mostly derived from distinguishable semantic transformations and transferred meanings more evidently based on metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche and they usually appear to be structured not in single lexemes but mostly in phrases or expressions and sometimes even in complete sentences. Semantic transformations in Albanian usually based on metaphor and metonymy are elaborated according to some similar sense related targets such as *sunlight, sleep, rest, peace, tranquillity, the world beyond, life, departure, disappearance, loss, darkness, world, earth, sun etc. dritën e diellit kurrë nuk e pa, i ktheu sytë nga dielli, fluturoi në qiell, e mori gjumi, fjeti, mbylli sytë, shkoi në botën tjetër, e la botën, i mbërtheu sytë, hyri në dhe*

Most of these expressions have generated extended synonymic lines. Religious rites and peoples' traditions are also reflected in the process of carefully selecting how not to mention the word death or the process of the physical loss itself. *i foli prifti, i foli hoxha, iu mbarua vaji i kandilit, shkoi në jetë të vërtetë, puthi kryqin, u martua me gurë e dhe*

Dr. Alda Jashari (Cicko), Euphemisms as Cultural and Social Phenomenon: Cross- Cultural Contrastive Study of English and Albanian Euphemistic Expressions

Even though euphemistic expressions related to death are as a rule constituted to show empathy, respect gratitude and careful intention “not to hurt one’s feelings” being highly figuratively embedded some of these units are enhanced with negative connotative values where in some cases (comparatively limited in number) people choose to react directly showing disrespect, hatred, rancour, lack of empathy etc. as in the examples *i mbloodhi lekat i ra këmbës, i ktheu patkonjë të nga dielli, shkoi për thana, shkoi me të shumtët, shkoi si qeni në rrush, e bëri bishtin pallë*.

Another lexicographical source is exploited for English euphemisms. “How not to say what you mean, A dictionary of euphemisms” by Holder, has recorded 351 euphemistic expressions related to death. Unlike the Albanian language, worth noting is the fact that a predominant number of euphemisms are single nominal constructions which usually serve as direct substitution of the mere word “death” with another alternative metaphorical finding such as *end, the call, eternal life, another state, happy release, better country (state, world), big jump, last call (debt, journey, voyage, trump, round up), eternity, great change (leveller, perhaps, secret, majority), diet of worms, piece, life (assurance, cover, office, policy), resting place* and many more.

Considerable semantic transformations are based on metaphorical transference where the process of death is usually associated with the verbs *going, ceasing, falling, breathing, leaving, passing, sleeping, quitting, releasing, slipping, laying, losing etc.* Phrasal verbs constructions constitute an overwhelming number of euphemistic occurrences and appear to be stylistically referred as slangs and colloquialisms.

Religion and belief as in the case of Albanian, though greater in number and variety, have served as semantic themes for the constitution of a noticeable number of euphemisms, and are mostly associated to *God, heaven, Lord, Jesus, Maker, Abraham’s bosom, Prophet, Jordan river etc.*

Both positive and negative connotational values can be traced in euphemistic expressions related to death in English. In each case, the lexical choice is apparently conditioned by peoples’ attitude to this process, either respecting and in a delicate and careful way addressing it as a “not to be mentioned thing” or directly mercilessly and disrespectfully revealing the negative aspect of the person departing this life or the process itself.

Albanian and English euphemisms related to illnesses

Another interesting example of the so called “word choice” of highly sensitive topics related to the dangers and risks the “unspoken” would bring to the Albanian somehow undeveloped and primitive society. As being noticed in fact, both English and Albanian language-speaking communities have extensively established euphemisms related to illnesses

and they are based on the same typology and are mostly on a similar undeveloped cultural, social and economic mindset usually constituted on a concrete fear and hopelessness conditioned by unexplained collective ignorance.

Albanian euphemistic expressions are mostly related with *tuberculosis, measles, epilepsy, tonsils* or the so-called “*children’s illness*” apparently a euphemistic expression itself. On statistical bases 30 Albanian euphemisms are related to the word “epilepsy”.

A careful semantic analysis helps us explore the content of these units and the general belief that Albanians have chosen so many different words to denote this sickness as to “mitigate and minimise the actual danger” or to simply make it disappear” Most of these units are logically related to the ground possibly describing the contact the person suffering from this illness establishes.

In other examples the word choice is simply limited to the use of demonstratives such as “**that**” both in feminine and masculine, or “**that one**”, “**the ground one**”, “**the good one**”, “**the mean**”, “**the evil**”. It seems that all the burden or pejorative overload this illness carries is stripped off by merely “forgetting about” what it may seriously call.

Similarly, the euphemistic expressions related to the tuberculosis, has linguistically produced 10 synonymic lexical items mostly compounds or syntagms with determinative relations based on the nominative word the symptom of this illness “the cough”. Due to peoples’ perception and adjectives such as “good”, “bad” or “dry” have been attached to the word “cough”.

English euphemistic expressions to illnesses are mostly referend to *heart diseases (heart attacks, C, card, cardiac incident, cardiac arrest, coronary inefficiency, heart problem)*.

It seems that one of the biggest concerns of English community is the avoidance and the indirect nomination to people with disabilities especially those suffering from physical and mental handicaps. Among the euphemistic expressions shaped as reflecting these disorders it could be mentioned *handicapped, inconvenienced, visually handicapped, visually impaired, visually inconvenienced, thick of hearing, human difference, mobility impaired, optically handicapped, people with differing abilities, physically challenged, physically handicapped, sight deprived, stone deaf, temporarily abled, differently abled, disability, disorder, aurally handicapped, restricted etc.*

CONCLUSIONS

Both Albanian and English languages possess rich collections of euphemisms, reflecting cultural norms, historical contexts, and societal sensitivities. Each language has its own linguistic quirks when it comes to euphemisms. While both languages employ euphemisms, their specific expressions and underlying cultural connotations vary significantly. Delving into the intriguing world of

Dr. Alda Jashari (Cicko), Euphemisms as Cultural and Social Phenomenon: Cross- Cultural Contrastive Study of English and Albanian Euphemistic Expressions

euphemisms in these two languages, similarities, differences, and unique nuances can be spotted.

Euphemisms often involve metaphorical language, religious and cultural references. Tracking these traits provides valuable insights into cultural dynamics and societal norms. Albanian and English euphemisms offer fascinating windows into the respective cultures and societies from which they emerge.

Whether navigating delicate topics, expressing sympathy, or maintaining social decorum, euphemisms play a vital role in communication. By exploring the nuances of euphemistic language in both Albanian and English, we gain a deeper appreciation for the subtleties and complexities of human expression.

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