

**A Study of English Death Euphemisms with Reference to their
Translations into Arabic
- A Case Study -**

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Abstract

This study is a socio-linguistic one dealing with the English death euphemisms and their Arabic equivalents which are employed at certain situations to avoid bad omens and avoid hurting others' feelings. The current study hypothesizes that death euphemism is a typical and common cultural phenomenon in both Arabic and English.

The study aims at improving our understanding of the English and Arabic cultures concerning death aspects. So, it examines how some linguistic expressions are actually products of societal and cultural mores and pressures. How people use euphemism to talk about death is a direct reflection of these social concerns. In order to examine this sentiment, examples of death euphemism are extracted from *Allen, K. and Burridge, K. (1991) Euphemism and Dysphemism: Language used as Shield and Weapon. Oxford: Oxford University Press.*

1- Introduction

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). Larson (1998: 116) argues that "Most languages have ways of saying die without using the word

which has the primary meaning die. English uses pass away and many other terms".

Hudson (2000: 260) remarks that "Euphemism is the extension of ordinary words and phrases to express unpleasant or embarrassing ideas. The indirectness of form is felt to diminish the unpleasantness of the meaning". LÖbner (2002: 36) states that "Negative connotations, together with social taboos, are responsible for what are called euphemisms".

English euphemism is a language phenomenon that exists popularly in English people's lives and death euphemism is just one of the most important parts in euphemistic culture. During the process of communication, people, in the English as well as Arabic cultures create a great majority of euphemistic expressions about *death* in order not to make *death* sound so scary.

2- Origin of Death Euphemism

Everything in the world has its origin. So is the case with the English *death* euphemism. Long ago, many phenomena could not be explained clearly, just like *die*. People did not know why a person would die, but they believed it was a mysterious power. *Death* is a terrible word that reminds people of dark or cold things. People avoid talking about it, because they are afraid of losing their families or friends. Consequently, a lot of euphemisms are used, such as: "*be asleep forever*", taken to substitute *death* as well as the "*to be brought to one's long home*".

3- Death Euphemism and Culture

Culture, in a broad sense, includes customs, ideas, objects, techniques, language, civilization, art, literature, etc. of a particular society or group of people. Wehmeier (2001: 227) argues that, English death euphemism is a special language. England is a hometown of prevailing euphemism. People there, are inclined to use a lot of euphemistic words to express something terrible. As a story tells: a guest from Paris was travelling and living in England,

one day, his landlady told him with grief on face: "My husband has just passed to the other side." This Paris man looked toward the other side of the garden, but he saw nobody and was puzzled at that time. So his landlady explained further to him: "I mean he has kicked the bucket." He comforted her and said: "I hope his foot will be better soon." But the landlady did not understand what her guest said, and she explained: "No, he wasn't here, he snuffed it ...you know." Still the Paris man couldn't get what his landlady wanted to express. He blurted out suddenly: "But you've got electricity here". We can know from the story why the Paris man answered this woman with other things that were outlying when she talked about one thing. Because the Paris man was not aware of euphemisms that the landlady used, even he did not understand the "Conversational implication" of euphemism. As a matter of fact, what she said means that her husband had passed away. In other words, her husband died. "*Passed to the other side, kicked the bucket, and snuffed it*" are phrases in the story that are all "death" euphemisms. *Passed to the other side, Kick the bucket and snuffed it* were translated subsequently into *انتقل إلى الجانب الآخر*, *رفس الدلو*, *إستنشقها* by most of Arab native speakers whom I asked to translate it. A matter that proves the linguistic variation among cultures.

In different cultures, there is a need to use the different euphemisms to express *death*. Namely, the origins of English *death* euphemism are so wide and different (Wehmeier, 1994: 200).

4- Death Euphemism and Religion

The *death* euphemisms from the Bible have embodied life value and explained people's death; just as God creates human beings of clay, and after death, they would *return to dust* which would be rendered into *التراب عاد إلى*, and *ووري الثرى*. The notion that people have sins with birth, they must atone for them, and after death, they would *pay the debt of nature* *يوفي بدينه للطبيعة*. God is the master of everything in the universe. When people die, they *are called to God*, which has the Arabic equivalent *أخذه ربه إلى جواره*,

having met one's maker which can be rendered into *انتقل إلى جوار* *the man just called by the will of the Almighty before his throne of mercy* which has the same equivalent *انتقل إلى رحمة مولاه*, *gone to be with the Lord* *أخذه ربه إلى جواره*. People would *go to heaven* can be translated into *في جنات الخلود* in the future. And then, they can *be with God*, Arabic has the same equivalent *يلتحق بخالقه*, *be asleep in the arms of God / in Jesus / lie in Abraham's bosom*, it can be translated into its Arabic equivalent *في رعاية الله* and *be at peace* *ذهب إلى حسن المثوى* *life go to one's final reward* *رقد بسلام*. This makes *life go to one's final reward* *In Heaven* *في جنات الخلود*. According to the Christianity, Islam and some other religions, human beings are all created by God. They are God's sons and daughters. God loves his children, and humans also love God. But humans have sins with birth, they must believe in and obey God, and God would absolve their sins. This can help them go to heaven after their death. Some expressions like: *"to answer the final summons* *لبي النداء الأخير*, *to depart to God* *صعدت روحه إلى السماء*, *to join the angels* *التحق بالباري*, *to be taken to paradise*" *في جنات الخلود*, etc. are euphemistically used to express the world after death and make people have a spiritual dependence, living quietly, and leaving with a smile in the end. *Death* is regarded as the beginning of a new life that is always expressed in several words, such as *"go to a better place* *في دار الجنان*, *be called to a higher life* *فاضت روحه*, etc. Today, they are used widely by the public (Allan and Burridge, 1991: 87).

5-Death Euphemism as a Metaphor

Euphemisms are structurally formed in a linguistic synecdoche, which is a figure of speech and it is euphemistically employed by metaphor (Abu Zaid, 1988: 49). It occurs where a word or a phrase has both literal meaning and one or more transferred meanings (Palmer, 1976: 66).

Metaphor is a way of describing something by comparing it to something else which has the same qualities (but without using the words *as* or *like*). Metaphor constitutes a potent source of metaphorical reference to the death taboo. This seems to confirm the

pervasiveness of metaphor to refer to the topic of death, a device which is considered “not only as a specific figure of speech but also, in its broader sense, as the foundation of language itself” (Wheeler, 1994:21). Writers usually resort to consolatory metaphors, i.e., highly poetic and connotative metaphors which aim at evading the linguistic taboos *death* and *die* with the purpose of providing some sort of consolation to those left alive and help them accept the reality of the loss of a loved one. It must be noted that the majority of metaphors view *death* as a positive event, as a sort of reward in Heaven after a virtuous life on earth.

Using metaphor to express *death* is one way not mention it. Usually, *death* is compared to *home*, *sleep*, *rest*, *time*, *going away* and *going west*, etc. The metaphor about home: *to be called home*, *to be home* and *free*, *to go home*, *to go to one's own place* and *to be brought to one's last / long home* can be rendered into انتقل إلى الدارة . انتقل إلى مثواه الأخير، الآخرة . For example, “George, I say to my apprentice, shut shop up. My old friend John Baines is going to his long home today”. About sleep: *to sleep*, *be asleep forever*, *final sleep*, *to be asleep in the arms of God* استودعناه الله and *to have fallen asleep*. About rest: *go to rest*, *to have found rest*, *to rest in peace*, *to go to one's resting place* and *to take one's rest* رقد بسلام . About going away: *to pass away*, *to fade away*, *to come to an end*, *to go off*, *to be gone* and *to lose*, etc. About time: *one's time is at hand* دقت ساعته . About west: *go to the west* which can be rendered into أفل . أفلت شمسه or نجمه . East is a place that is considered as the sun rise and life birth. West, is a place the sun sets and life ends. These expressions are all the euphemistic metaphors of *death* (Wehmeler, 1994:582-4).

6- Death as a Taboo

Death is, as Allan and Burridge (1991:153) argue, “a Free-based taboo” in which different fears coexist, namely fear of the loss of loved ones, fear of the corruption of the body, fear of evil spirits and fear of what comes after death. Thus, silence sometimes

coexists with paralinguistic elements with the purpose of avoiding the taboo words *death* and *die*. Indeed, a set of gestures can be used to refer to death, as is the case of the traditional Chinese manner of clenching the hands and throwing the head slightly back (Gross: 1985: 204). When speakers realize that a taboo notion is unacceptable based on the specific context, often times they engage in euphemism creation in order to indirectly refer to the taboo notion.

It should be mentioned that there is a dark side to euphemism. This centres mainly on political and military double-talk, which is designed to intentionally deceive, "to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind". Such strategies are especially dangerous in that they deceive both the hearer and the speaker themselves. Extreme examples of this include the *ethnic cleansing* (Rawson, 1981:4).

The conceptual metaphor understands death in terms of a journey with a spiritual destination. Thanks to this conceptualization, based on the trivial assumption that the dead person is no longer around, as Bultnick (1998: 31) points out, human mortality is conceptualized as a departure from this world in which a basic domain of experience like death is understood in terms of a different and more concrete domain, as a journey, an association which provides the basis for the verbal mitigation of the taboo.

7- Death Euphemism vs. Doublespeak

Euphemisms that are used to mislead or deceive are called doublespeak. Lutz (2000:230) states the following regarding the power of language: Language is a tool or weapon that can be used by those in power to achieve their ends at the expense of others. Doublespeak is language that only pretends to communicate, that makes the bad seems good, the negative appears positive, the unpleasant attractive, or at least tolerable. It is language that avoids, shifts, or denies responsibility, language that conceals or prevents

thought. *Be cut away in the bloom of life, Be carried off in the prime of life* سُلِبَ عنفوان حياته . These two phrases are instances of a conceptualization in which death is viewed as an adversary, as a cruel enemy which can destroy us (Marin Arrese 1996:43). Therefore, from this standpoint, the two cases just mentioned can be said to convey a dysphemistic approach to death, rather than a euphemistic one, given the unfavourable connotations that these phrases transmit

8- Pragmatic Death Euphemism:

The use of euphemism is one type of indirect speech. It is more inferential in its non-natural meaning rather than its natural meaning. Understanding the implicature of euphemisms is largely dependent on the reasonable inference and reasoning by the receiver. Pragmatic inference is the inferring activity by the receiver of the speech in search of the non-natural meaning of a certain speech act. This kind of inference may include inferring the purposes of using euphemisms because inferring why the speaker or writer uses euphemisms in a certain occasion or context helps facilitate the receiver's understanding of the real implicature of such euphemism. In translating euphemisms, the translator faces the task of transferring into reality the possibility of the best communicating effect of the speaker or writer. So the key to the pragmatic inference lies in how to find out the real implicature of this kind of indirect speech (Levinson, 2001:263). *Pay the debt of nature* أوفى بدينه ، وافته المنية للطبيعة , death is seen as the final debt one must pay just before leaving earthly existence as part of the concluding phase of a sort of economic transaction, as Ayto (cited in Marin Arrese 1996: 46) argues.

9 - Elements to be taken into account in translating death euphemisms:

Translators may find many factors affecting their inference process. These factors may include general intelligence, rhetorical and contextual knowledge, cross-cultural awareness, past

experiences etc. Here, emphasis is mainly on translators' cross-cultural awareness and hopes to enhance their cross-cultural knowledge by discussing the same Arabic and English euphemisms.

Larson (1998: 116) confirms that: "Euphemism will often need to be translated by a comparable euphemism in the receptor language. The important thing is for the translator to recognize the euphemistic nature of the source language expression and then translate with an appropriate and acceptable expression of the receptor language whether euphemistic or direct. For example, the Greek expression *he is sleeping with his fathers* might be translated *he went to his village* in Twi. However, some languages might simply say *he died* and to them it would be inoffensive".

Based on common emotions and habits, many same or similar euphemisms exist in both English and Arabic. They are equivalents to each other; however, also in existence are some others which are unique in one language and lack their equivalent in the other. Translators should pay more attention to the latter type by enhancing their cross-cultural awareness.

As is mentioned above, many different factors, including rhetorical, stylistic and contextual ones and so on, may all affect the pragmatic inference of euphemism by the receiver and eventually the understanding and expressive effect of it. Therefore, it is advisable for the translator to attach great importance to these elements while paying constant attention to cross-cultural differences in translating euphemisms. The following are three elements deserving translators' consideration.

9-1 Stylistic Element

While translating euphemisms, translators should always bear in mind the stylistic differences in rendering the same euphemism into different writing styles and languages. A most obvious example is the translation of *die*. Allen and Burridge (1991:21) remark that *die* has at least seventy different expressions, such as *perish, expire, emit the last breath, end one's days, pass*

away, cross the Styx, return to the earth, slide into oblivion, to kick the bucket, to go to Nirvana, to pay the debt of nature, to join the choir invisible, etc. While translating *die* into English in an informal or colloquial style, one may choose such words as *join the majority, to answer the last call*, and so on rather than *perish, expire, croak*, etc. In conclusion, the stylistic factors for the translator's consideration mainly concern the subtle difference between a word's denotation and connotation, its stylistic color as well as its register.

9- 2 Rhetorical Element

According to Larson (1998: 34), in translating euphemisms, one should try to employ the equivalent euphemistic expression in the target language. However, this should also depend on the response of the prospective receiver of it and the condition of the target language, because not every euphemism in the source language has its equivalent in the target language. Therefore, one should also abstain oneself from blindly seeking equivalents only in form instead of in meaning. Death is conceptualized as an event which, far from being fearful or harmful, involves a sort of liberation thanks to which the deceased and his/her survivors will find some hope and consolation. (*a reward for someone in Heaven* or as a *blissful reward in the world of unending glory* can be translated into *في البرزخ*. In the second example, the death is figuratively associated with a reward achieved by moral discipline after a life full of good deeds, as in the metaphor *enjoyment of the fruits of a well spent life* .

The euphemistic metonymies have different rhetoric communications, such as respect in avoiding saying in public something horrible or impolite as in the case of urination, defecation and sex , optimistic for what would be the situation in the case of death and allusion as in the case of wars or political language in announcing something which is not completely meant (Alhashimi, 2001: 278).

9- 3 Contextual Element

Appropriateness to the occasion and contextual cohesion are two major concerns to the translation of euphemisms. The former one calls for the consideration of the translator of the contextual factors conducive to the realization of the implicature of euphemisms while the latter requires the translator to be aware of the acceptability of the renderings in the target language. Because euphemism is defined by the context that it occurs in, a speaker must be aware of the different levels of context in which they are interacting. For many speakers, breaking the norm of the context in which they are in serves to celebrate their individuality and to comment on the reason why taboo notions are essentially arbitrary because of their association with certain contexts (Sperber and Wilson, 2001:125).

Interpretation varies according to context, i.e. whether the speaker means the term to be euphemistic, and the hearer interprets it in that light (Warren, 1992:33). With euphemism being so entwined with context, however, classification of a term as 'euphemistic' becomes difficult. For this reason, Allen and Burridge (1991:21) suggest the hypothetical context of being "polite to a casual acquaintance of the opposite sex in a formal situation in a middle class environment" as one in which an euphemism is likely to be used in place of a 'un-preferred' alternative.

9-4 The Psychological element:

Some words and phrases in languages live longer than others. Some have a short or a very short life, others longer, and others are permanent. This shows that language is subject to continual change and development. This change and development reflects that languages are the best records for the history of people. Such change and development have linguistic, social and psychological reasons, as well as influence from other languages (Almubarak, 1981:211). The psychological reasons are connected to euphemisms (ibid: 215).

10- Conclusion

In the discussion above, the cultural and social bases of death euphemisms have been explored on the footing of both speaker/writer , receiver and translator of euphemisms.

It has been concluded that euphemism is a common phenomenon in both Arabic and English and has some special characters, which are universality (there are taboos in almost all cultures), culture specificity (different cultures have different taboos), re-symbolism (euphemism is substitution of one expression for another), and beautification (people substitute taboo words with euphemisms that sound pleasant, polite and harmless). English and Arabic euphemisms have more resemblances and less distinctions, This shows that euphemism is a universal phenomenon in languages and it is expected that most of the similarities and differences between English and Arabic may possibly be found among other languages.

Based on common emotions and habits, many same or similar euphemisms exist in both English and Arabic. They are equivalent to each other; however, also in existence are some others which are unique in one language and lack their equivalents in the other. Translators should pay more attention to the latter type by enhancing their cross-cultural awareness.

So long as we know the origin, the development, the occasions of English and Arabic euphemism usage, we can avoid conflicts and communicate with each other effectively and properly.

In sum, *death* euphemism is both a language phenomenon and cultural phenomenon, which makes people avoid this terrible and mysterious word directly, and express their awe and respect, their sympathy and comfort more effectively, which people can easily accept.

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