

EUPHEMISTIC SUBSTITUTION AS A CROSS-CULTURAL PRAGMATIC STRATEGY: CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH AND UZBEK

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Abstract. This article presents a contrastive linguistic analysis of euphemisms in English and Uzbek, two typologically distinct languages that reveal fascinating parallel strategies for avoiding taboo, softening harsh realities, and navigating social conventions through language. Drawing on corpus data and sociolinguistic theory, the study examines thematic domains including death, illness, bodily functions, poverty, war, and professional status where both languages employ euphemistic substitution. The analysis demonstrates that while surface forms differ markedly, the underlying cognitive motivations are largely universal, shaped by shared human experiences of shame, fear, and politeness. Cultural specificities, including Islamic influences on Uzbek euphemism and Anglo-American corporate culture on English, are also explored. The findings contribute to a broader understanding of how language mediates reality across diverse cultural contexts.

Keywords: euphemism, dysphemism, taboo language, sociolinguistics, Uzbek, English, contrastive linguistics, politeness theory.

Annotatsiya. Ushbu maqola ingliz va o'zbek tillaridagi evfemizmlarning qarama-qarshi lingvistik tahlilini taqdim etadi, ular tabudan qochish, qattiq voqelikni yumshatish va til orqali ijtimoiy konvensiyalarni boshqarishning ajoyib parallel strategiyalarini ochib beradi. Korpus ma'lumotlari va sotsiolingvistik nazariyaga asoslanib, tadqiqot o'lim, kasallik, tana funktsiyalari, qashshoqlik, urush va kasbiy maqomni o'z ichiga olgan tematik sohalarni o'rganadi, bu erda ikkala tilda evfemistik almashtirish qo'llaniladi. Tahlil shuni ko'rsatadiki, yuzaki shakllar sezilarli darajada farq qilsa-da, asosiy kognitiv motivlar asosan universal bo'lib, odamlarning sharmandalik, qo'rquv va xushmuomalalik tajribasi bilan shakllanadi. Madaniy o'ziga xosliklar, jumladan, o'zbek evfemizmiga islom ta'siri va ingliz tilidagi ingliz-amerika korporativ madaniyati ham o'rganiladi. Topilmalar tilning turli madaniy kontekstlarda voqelikka qanday vositachilik qilishini kengroq tushunishga yordam beradi.

Kalit so'zlar: evfemizm, disfemizm, taqiqlangan til, sotsiolingvistika, o'zbek, ingliz, kontrastli tilshunoslik, xushmuomalalik nazariyasi.

Аннотация. В данной статье представлен сравнительный лингвистический анализ эвфемизмов в английском и узбекском языках двух типологически различных языках, который выявляет интересные параллельные стратегии избегания табу, смягчения суровых реалий и соблюдения социальных норм посредством языка. Опираясь на корпусные данные и социолингвистическую теорию, исследование рассматривает тематические области включая смерть, болезнь, телесные функции, бедность, войну и профессиональный статус где оба языка используют эвфемистическую замену. Анализ показывает, что, хотя поверхностные формы заметно различаются, лежащие в их основе когнитивные мотивы в значительной степени универсальны и формируются общим человеческим опытом стыда, страха и вежливости. Также исследуются культурные особенности, включая исламское влияние на узбекские эвфемизмы и англо-американскую корпоративную культуру на английский язык. Полученные результаты способствуют более широкому пониманию того, как язык опосредует реальность в различных культурных контекстах.

Ключевые слова: эвфемизм, дисфемизм, табуированная речь, социолингвистика, узбекский язык, английский язык, контрастивная лингвистика, теория вежливости

Introduction. Language is never a neutral instrument. Every speech community develops strategies for navigating the unutterable topics so fraught with social risk,

emotional weight, or cultural taboo that direct reference is felt to be inappropriate. The euphemism, derived from the Greek eu ('well') and pHEME ('speech'), is perhaps the most universal of these strategies: the practice of substituting an agreeable or inoffensive expression for one that might give offence or suggest something unpleasant.

Literature analysis. The study of euphemism sits at the intersection of linguistics, psychology, and cultural anthropology. Allan and Burridge (1991) famously described language behavior as governed by a speaker's desire to avoid "face-threatening" communication a formulation that resonates with Goffman's sociological concept of face and with the politeness frameworks developed by Brown and Levinson (1987). From this perspective, euphemism is not mere dishonesty or evasion; it is a sophisticated social lubricant that enables communities to speak of the difficult without causing unnecessary discomfort. A Omonturdiyev proposed that euphemism, as a research topic of stylistics, is one of the topics that should be studied more deeply. His research focuses on the evolution of euphemistic meaning, and he divides euphemisms into general and specific speech euphemisms according to their level of use, studying the methods of their expression. This classification provides practical information about euphemistic units in Uzbek speech. He studied euphemisms across a wide range of professional domains including cattle breeding, hunting, farming, law, journalism, diplomacy, medicine, wrestling, matchmaking, weaving, tailoring, blacksmithing, and the art

It is known that euphemism is defined as the substitution of a mild, indirect, or vague expression for one considered harsh, blunt, or taboo. Alongside dysphemism the deliberate use of a derogatory or taboo term and orthophemism the neutral, direct reference euphemism constitutes a tripartite pragmatic system for evaluating topic sensitivity. Scholars have distinguished between primary euphemisms, which arise directly to replace a taboo expression, and secondary euphemisms, which emerge when primary forms themselves become tainted by association (a process Rawson (1981) calls "the euphemism treadmill"). The English sequence lunatic → mad → mentally ill → mentally challenged illustrates this drift clearly; Uzbek shows analogous patterns in domains such as poverty and physical disability.

Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of positive and negative politeness provides a robust framework for understanding euphemism cross-linguistically. Positive politeness strategies affirming solidarity and in-group membership may involve euphemistic praise or softening of criticism. Negative politeness respecting an addressee's autonomy and desire not to be imposed upon involves mitigation of requests and taboo references. Both English and Uzbek speakers deploy euphemisms in service of these goals, though the cultural weight given to each strategy differs. Uzbek culture, influenced by the concept of uyat (shame) and or-nomus (honor/dignity), shows a pronounced orientation toward avoiding public shame for both speaker and hearer. This produces a richer euphemistic repertoire in

domains of bodily function, death, and interpersonal failure than might be found in comparably direct Northern European speech communities.

Research methodology. English and Uzbek make for a compelling comparative pairing. English is an Indo-European language with a vast lexical repertoire, shaped by centuries of French, Latin, Norse, and more recently American cultural influence. Uzbek, by contrast, is a Turkic language of the Karluk branch, the official language of Uzbekistan, spoken by approximately 35 million people. Its euphemistic tradition has been molded by Persian literary culture, Islamic religious norms, Soviet-era linguistic ideology, and post-independence national revival. Despite these profound structural and cultural differences, both languages display remarkably parallel mechanisms for softening social realities.

Results and discussion. Linguists postulate that euphemisms can be categorized into distinct thematic groups depending on the situational context and topic. No domain generates more euphemism across human languages than death. The taboo against direct reference to death is virtually universal, rooted in a combination of superstitious fear, emotional delicacy, and social convention. English provides an extraordinary abundance: to pass away, to pass on, to be no more, to depart, to go to a better place, to meet one's maker, to kick the bucket (informal), to pop one's clogs (British informal), to be six feet under, to cross over, to breathe one's last. Uzbek is equally rich. Common euphemisms include vafot etmoq (lit.'to fulfill one's oath/duty', i.e., 'to die'), dunyo o'tmoq (lit.'to pass from this world'), Allohning rahmatiga ketmoq (lit.'to go to Allah's mercy'), jon bermoq (lit.'to give one's soul'), olamdan ko'z yummoq (lit.'to close one's eyes to the world'), and qazo qilmoq (from Arabic qadha, 'divine decree'). The Islamic orientation of Uzbek euphemism is evident: death is framed not as a termination but as a return to God.

Illness has historically attracted euphemism both because of social stigma and because of the superstitious belief that naming a disease may invite it. In English, cancer was long referred to simply as "the C-word" or "a long illness"; mental illness was historically disguised as nerves, a breakdown, or exhaustion. Contemporary English medical discourse has shifted toward clinical terminology (e.g., passing away → cardiac arrest in medical contexts), yet lay speech continues to euphemize.

Uzbek shows a particularly strong tradition of euphemizing serious illness. The terms kasallik (illness) may be replaced by holsizlik (weakness), ahvoli og'ir (condition heavy), or Xudoning sinovi (God's test). Physical disability may be referred to as imkoniyati cheklangan (limited in possibilities) a calque of the English phrase 'differently abled' that reflects Soviet-era and post-Soviet influence — or, more traditionally, as ojiz (weak/helpless).

Economic hardship is a persistent source of social shame across cultures, generating extensive euphemistic vocabulary. English has developed a rich set of economic softeners: low-income (for poor), underprivileged, economically disadvantaged, at-risk, financially challenged, living on a tight budget. The corporate world produces its own register:

downsizing, rightsizing, restructuring, and workforce optimization all disguise mass redundancy.

In Uzbek, direct reference to poverty (*qashshoqlik*, *kambag'allik*) is typically avoided in polite discourse. Common substitutions include *holim chigal* (my situation is tangled), *ahvolim og'ir* (my condition is heavy), *zardobim zo'r* (I am under stress), and *kam ta'minlangan* (poorly provided). Rural Uzbek speakers may use the formulaic expression *ilohim yaxshilikka* (may God turn it to good) when acknowledging difficulties, a phrase that simultaneously acknowledges hardship and invokes divine amelioration.

Political and military discourse is one of the most studied domains of euphemism in English. Orwell's famous essay 'Politics and the English Language' (1946) identified the use of elevated, Latinate vocabulary to obscure violent reality as a central tool of political manipulation. Collateral damage (civilian deaths), enhanced interrogation (torture), surgical strike (targeted bombing), friendly fire (killing one's own troops), and pre-emptive action (unprovoked attack) are among the most cited examples. Uzbek political euphemism has been shaped by Soviet linguistic heritage and by post-independence political culture. The Soviet period bequeathed expressions such as *xalq dushmani* (enemy of the people) itself a dysphemism and a culture of bureaucratic indirection. Contemporary Uzbek political discourse employs euphemisms like *tartibsizlik* (disorder, for protest or unrest), *tashkiliy o'zgarish* (organizational change, for political purge), and *cheklov* (restriction, for censorship or ban).

One of the most productive mechanisms in both languages is semantic elevation: the replacement of a lower-register, direct term with a higher-register, indirect one. In English, this typically involves borrowing from Latin or French: *die* → *expire* → *pass away*; *old* → *elderly* → *senior*; *cripple* → *disabled* → *differently-abled*. The Latinate or French word carries social prestige and emotional distance.

In Uzbek, semantic elevation characteristically involves borrowing from Arabic or Persian, languages that carry cultural prestige through Islamic scholarship. Thus *vafot* (Arabic: fulfillment, death) is more elevated than *o'lim* (death); *holsizlik* (weakness) more genteel than *kasal* (sick). Persian-derived vocabulary similarly lends formality: *marhum* (Arabic: deceased) is standard in obituary and condolence contexts.

Metaphorical extension is a universal mechanism of euphemism. English death metaphors draw on travel (passing on, departing, crossing over), sleep (eternal rest, going to sleep), and light (passing into the light). The conceptual metaphor DEATH IS A JOURNEY is remarkably consistent across both languages.

Uzbek exploits similar metaphorical sources, particularly those sanctioned by Sufi literary tradition. The Sufi poet's beloved is often a metaphor for the Divine, and death a metaphor for mystical union; this tradition enriches the literary register of euphemism. Expressions like *dunyodan o'tmoq* (to pass from the world) echo classical ghazal imagery.

English makes extensive use of abbreviation to defuse taboo, particularly in medical and bureaucratic contexts: STI (sexually transmitted infection), IBS (irritable bowel syndrome), PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), and the now-common use of initials for profanity (WTF, BS) in print and digital media. Abbreviation creates psychological distance by replacing an emotionally charged word with a purely referential symbol.

This mechanism is less developed in Uzbek, partly because of Uzbek's agglutinative morphology (which resists the formation of compact initialisms) and partly because of cultural preference for indirect paraphrase over abbreviation. However, Soviet-era influence introduced Russian-style abbreviations into Uzbek bureaucratic discourse, some of which have acquired euphemistic function.

Islam profoundly shapes the thematic and lexical contours of Uzbek euphemism. The obligation of *halol* (lawful) speech, the prohibition on *ghiba* (backbiting), and the concept of *adab* (refined conduct) create a moral framework within which euphemism functions not merely as social politeness but as religious duty. The invocation of divine agency — *Allohning irodasi bilan* (by God's will), *Xudoning marhamati* (God's mercy) — transforms potentially disturbing references to death, illness, and hardship into affirmations of faith. This theological dimension has no direct parallel in contemporary English, though medieval and early modern English showed similar patterns, and religious communities (particularly evangelical and Catholic) retain higher rates of religiously inflected euphemism than the general population.

English is notable for the density of euphemism in professional and corporate contexts, a phenomenon linked to American corporate culture's emphasis on positive framing. The genre of the performance review, the job description, and the corporate press release has produced a highly conventionalized euphemistic register: proactive (pushy), passionate (aggressive), synergy (undefined combination), let go (fired), between opportunities (unemployed), rightsizing (layoffs).

Uzbek corporate euphemism is less developed, partly because the market economy is more recent and partly because traditional hierarchical relationships between employer and employee draw on different politeness norms — those of respect for seniority and avoidance of direct confrontation — rather than the pseudo-egalitarian corporate register of Anglo-American business culture. Steven Pinker popularized the concept of the 'euphemism treadmill' — the observation that euphemisms tend to become tainted over time by their association with the thing they name, necessitating replacement. The English sequence retarded → handicapped → disabled → differently-abled → person with disabilities illustrates the principle: each term becomes stigmatized and is superseded.

Uzbek shows analogous sequences, though the pace may differ. Traditional terms for social outcasts, physical disabilities, or mental illness have been successively replaced as each accumulates negative connotation. Soviet ideology introduced a set of ideologically motivated replacements (replacing Islamic and pre-Soviet terminology)

which have themselves been partly displaced by post-independence neologisms and international borrowings. This diachronic dimension underlines the fundamentally unstable nature of euphemism: it is not a permanent solution to linguistic discomfort, but a continuously renewed negotiation between language and reality. This contrastive analysis of euphemism in English and Uzbek reveals a compelling combination of universality and cultural specificity. Both languages employ a broad range of mechanisms — semantic elevation, metaphor, abbreviation, paraphrase — to navigate the same fundamental human taboos: death, bodily function, illness, poverty, and political violence. The cognitive impulse to soften linguistic reality appears to be a species-wide characteristic, reflecting shared experiences of vulnerability and social interdependence.

Yet the cultural texture of euphemism differs markedly. Uzbek euphemism is deeply inflected by Islamic ethics, the concept of honor (or-nomus), and a tradition of Persian-Arabic learned vocabulary. English euphemism reflects a different set of pressures: class-consciousness, medical professionalism, political spin, and more recently, corporate culture and identity politics. These differences are not merely stylistic; they index fundamentally different moral frameworks and social priorities. The practical implications of this analysis extend to translation, intercultural communication, and language teaching. A translator working between English and Uzbek must navigate not only lexical gaps but divergent systems of social meaning; what reads as appropriately indirect in one culture may read as evasive or opaque in the other. For language learners, sensitivity to euphemism is an advanced competency that requires cultural as well as linguistic knowledge.

Conclusion. Future research might productively extend this analysis to digital and social media discourse, where new forms of euphemism (emoji substitution, creative misspelling, coded reference) are emerging rapidly in both language communities. The enduring vitality of euphemism in both English and Uzbek testifies to language's central role not merely in describing the world, but in making it livable.

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