

Pragmatic Analysis of Euphemisms in the Film Forrest Gump

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Abstract: This paper takes the film, *Forrest Gump*, as an example and employs the Cooperative Principles and the Politeness Principles as the theoretical framework, trying to explore the pragmatic analysis of euphemisms in the film. The author attempts to answer the two research questions: ① How euphemisms can present characters' personalities or social background in *Forrest Gump*? ② What effect could achieve when the Cooperative Principles and the Politeness Principles work together?

Keywords: Pragmatic Analysis; Euphemism; *Forrest Gump*

1. Introduction

It is known that the word “euphemism” originated in Greek which has been widely employed in daily life. The prefix—“eu” in Greek equals “good, sounding well” in English and the root—“pheme” stands for “speech and saying”. Thus, we could know that the literal meaning of “euphemism” is “to speak with good words or in a pleasant manner”. As a special language expression, it could show the speaker's intention in an indirect way through avoiding offensive and unpleasant voice and reach interpersonal harmony. From the pragmatic perspective, euphemism should follow two basic pragmatic principles at the same time. One is the violation of the Cooperation Principles (CP) and the other one is the accordance with the Politeness Principles (PP).

From a pragmatic approach, the thesis aims to investigate the euphemisms used in the film *Forrest Gump* under the CP and the PP. Released in July 1994, *Forrest Gump* was a well-known film that was awarded Oscar Awards in 1995. Nowadays, it still plays a dominant and influential position in movie bossiness. It depicts *Forrest Gump*, a boy with congenital mental retardation who strives for self-improvement. Eventually, “stupid people have silly blessings” are inspired by God's favor and create miracles in many fields. In this movie, the dialogues between the protagonists contain many euphemisms. After the author analyzing the dialogue of 10 euphemisms, it can be found that 6 dialogues violate the CP and 4 dialogues observe the PP.

Moreover, the paper also attempts to answer the two questions through analyzing the cases: ① How does euphemism present characters' personalities and social background in *Forrest Gump*? ② What effect could achieve when the CP and PP work together?

2. Literature review

2.1 Euphemism study abroad and in China

Western scholars studied euphemisms earlier. In the 1580s, British writer Gorge Blunt first quoted the word “euphemism” and defined it as “a good or favorable interpretation of a bad word”. Since then, it has attracted the attention of many scholars. And American linguist Mencken (1977) discussed the reasons for the generation and popularity of hundreds of euphemisms in the American language, combined with the historical and cultural background of American society. In 1981, British linguist Hugh Rawson (1995) compiled and published a dictionary of Euphemisms

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and Other Doubletalk, which embodies the research results of euphemisms over the years. Later, Neaman and Sliver (1983) described the origin, history, development and changes of euphemism in a detailed way in their work kind word—A Treasure of Euphemisms. Then D.J. Enright (1985) provided reference materials with the following euphemism research. Allen and Burrige (1991) published Euphemism and Dysphemism, which was one of the most frequently referred works by domestic researchers.

Existing domestic research on euphemism focuses on five perspectives: semantics, sociolinguistics, rhetoric, psychology and pragmatics. From the perspective of semantics, representatives of sociolinguistics include Wu Lique (1987), Li Guonan (1989) and Wu Songchu (1996). Later, Chinese linguists turned to the perspective of rhetoric, and the representative was Chen Daowang (1976). Wu Lique (1998) studies euphemism on the level of psychology as well. From the perspective of pragmatics, Shu Dingfang is one of the most influential scholars. According to Grice and Leech's theory, Shu (1989, 1995) expounds on the three principles of the use of euphemism and the process of language communication that is, CP, PP and the principle of self-protection, which has a profound impact on the study of euphemisms.

2.2 Cooperative principles and politeness principles

The "CP" was proposed by the famous American language philosopher Herbert Paul Grice in a speech at Harvard University in 1967. He claimed that "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." In *Logic and Conversation*, Grice (1975) believes the PP that people abide by in conversation consist of four categories, and each category includes a maxim and some sub-maxims.

(1) The maxim of quantity: ① Make your contribution as informative as is required; ② Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

(2) The maxim of quality (try to make your true contribution one): ① Do not say what you believe to be false; ② Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

(3) The maxim of relation (be relevant).

(4) The maxim of manner (be perspicuous) :① Avoid obscurity; ② Avoid ambiguity; ③ Avoid unnecessary prolixity; ④ Be orderly.

People gradually attach importance to politeness and it has become a symbol of human civilization and also an important measure of social activities. In 1983, the famous British scholar Leech explained the significant role of politeness in language communication in the book *Principles of Pragmatic*. In a special cultural atmosphere, the politeness principle also specifically points out the different rules that people need to follow to achieve polite socialization. Leech (1983) divided the politeness principles into six categories, each category including one maxim and two maxims.

(1) Tact maxim: ① Minimize the cost to others; ② Maximize the benefit to others.

(2) Generosity maxim: ① Minimize benefit to self; ② Maximize cost to self.

(3) Approbation maxim: ① Minimize dispraise of other; ② Maximize praise of others.

(4) Modesty maxim: ① Minimize praise of self; ② Maximize dispraise of self.

(5) Agreement maxim: ① Minimize disagreement between self and other; ② Maximize agreement between self and other.

(6) Sympathy maxim: ① Minimize antipathy between self and other; ② Maximize sympathy between self and other.

In daily communication, people are generally required to abide by the four maxims of CP. But in real talk, it is impossible for people to fully abide by these maxims to achieve harmony. To make our language becomes indirect, euphemism comes into being. Therefore, the conclusion could be drawn that the use of euphemisms is a violation of the CP and also an observance of the PP.

3. Pragmatic analysis of euphemisms in the Film *Forrest Gump*

This chapter will make a further study on how euphemisms are presented in the Film *Forrest Gump* based on the theory of CP and PP. Three parts will be involved in this chapter. First, it will analyze euphemisms that violate the CP. Then, it will examine euphemisms that abide by the PP. Finally, the connection between the PP and CP will be discussed.

3.1 Euphemisms violating the cooperative principles

In *Forrest Gump*, it can be found that many euphemisms violate the CP. Some examples are listed as follows:

(1) Mr. Hillcock: We're a progressive school system. We don't want to see anybody left behind. Is there a Mr. Gump, Mrs. Gump?

Mrs. Gump: He is on vacation.

Since only Mrs. Gump came with Gump, Mr. Hillcock wants to ask whether Mr. Gump is at home or not. However, it might be a little offensive if he asked directly.

Then he asked in a euphemistic way “Is there a Mr. Gump, Mrs. Gump?” To his surprise, Mrs. Gump does not answer the question with “Yes or No” but says “He is on vacation.” We can see clearly from her words that she doesn’t want to tell others about Mr. Gump’s death in front of Gump or she even cannot accept the truth that Mr. Gump was dead. Thus, she doesn’t make her contribution as informative as is required, which violates the maxim of quantity but euphemistically achieves interpersonal harmony.

(2) Gump: Will you marry me? I’d make a good husband, Jenny.

Jenny: You would, Forrest.

Gump: But you don’t want to marry me.

Jenny: You won’t marry me.

Gump loves Jenny for a long time. When they are about to separate, Gump asked “Will you marry me?” to figure out Jenny’s idea. But Jenny responds with “You would” instead of “Yes or no”. She only gives some responses to the unimportant part “I’d make a good husband.” In the dialogue, Jenny does not refuse Gump directly but says something else to not break Gump’s heart. What she says is not informative as required, which violates the maxim of quantity.

(3) Gump: Mama, what’s vacation mean?

Mrs. Gump: Vacation?

Gump: Where daddy went?

Mrs. Gump: Vacation is when you go somewhere and you don’t ever come back.

In the above dialogue, When Mrs. Gump is asked what the meaning of vacation is, she thought for a second, pretending hardly to hear the question. Then, Mrs. Gump does not tell Gump the truth that his father was dead. For fear of Gump’s sadness, her explanation for vacation is not true. She violates the maxim of quality.

(4) Gump: I want to be your boyfriend.

Jenny: That uniform is a trip. Forest, you look handsome in it. You do.

When Gump shows his great affection for Jenny, Jenny ignores what Gump has said and slides into another irrelevant topic, his uniform. Jenny is a girl who is eager for freedom and rebellious. She does not want to live a normal life and persistently pursue the life that she wants, even drifting from place to place. Although she is the representative of the fallen generation in America at that time, she does not mean to hurt innocent Gump. Therefore, her responses are not relevant to what Gump has mentioned. She violates the maxim of relation.

(5) Gump: Those must be comfortable shoes. I’ll bet you could walk all day in shoes like that and not feel a thing. I wish I had shoes like that.

Nurse: My feet hurt.

Gump: Momma always says there’s an awful lot you could tell about a person by their shoes. Where they’re going, where they’ve been.

This conversation takes place at the beginning of the movie. Gump sits on a bench with a nurse and tells her his story. The nurse’s reply shows little connection to Gump’s words, which reveals that she might not be interested in talking to Gump or she just wants to say her shoes are uncomfortable. However, Gump does not stop talking and he continued what he wants to say, no matter what the nurse said. Both of them violate the maxim of relation.

(6) Mr. Hillcock: Your boy’s different, Mrs. Gump. His IQ is 75.

Mrs. Gump: Well, we are all different, Mr. Hillcock.

Here Mr. Hillcock and Mrs. Gump use the word “different” instead of “stupid” and “retarded” to describe Gump, which makes the dialogue more pleasant and comfortable to listeners. Moreover, “different” is a vague word that may result in ambiguity without completed context and backgrounding. This dialogue violates the maxim of manner.

3.2 Euphemisms abiding by the politeness principles

In *Forrest Gump*, many euphemisms abide by the PP. Here are some specific examples:

(7) Mr. Hillcock: Your boy’s different.

Mrs. Gump: Well, we are all different, Mr. Hillcock.

Due to Gump’s birth defect, Hillcock is reluctant to accept him to their school. With great tact, Mrs. Gump skillfully uses puns to give “different” a new meaning, that is, there are unique differences between people. The word “different” can avoid embarrassing Gump’s mother, who is out of love and affection for her son, and the expression embodies the wisdom of the great mother to protect the child’s self-esteem. These two “different” with different meanings also reflect the cruelty and bitterness of social reality from the other side. It conforms to the tact maxim of PP, that is, minimizing cost to others.

(8) Mr. Hillcock: He’s going to have to go to a special school.

A special school is a school for children with physical problems or learning problems. Instead of saying disabled school, Hillcock mentions special school politely, which makes the listener comfortable and acceptable. It complies with PP as well.

(9) Mrs. Gump: What does normal mean. anyway? He might be a bit on the slow side.

Mrs. Gump is a great mother who plays a significant role in Gump’s life. It is his mother who inspires Gump all the

time and encourages him to be a better person. When she refers to Gump's defects, she only replies with "a bit on the slow side".

Another example is given. When Gump recalled Jenny in his childhood, he said to himself:

(10) Now, remember how I told you that Jenny never seemed to want to go home? Well, she lived in a house that was as old as Alabama. Her mama had gone up to heaven when she was five and daddy was some kind of a farmer.

"Death" has always been an unlucky or terrifying word. Throughout history, people in various cultures around the world have used various euphemistic expressions to replace "death", such as to go to heaven, to go to another world, to pass away, etc. In the film, Gump and Jenny were very close friends in their childhood. Until growing up, Gump's affections for Jenny remained. When the movie shows Gump recalling Jenny's childhood life. He doesn't use the die word directly but replaces it with gone to heaven. Through the use of this euphemism, we can see Gump's infinite care and nostalgia for Jenny. The example observes the PP of sympathy maxim, that is, maximize sympathy between self and other.

3.3 Connection between the cooperative principles and the politeness principles in euphemisms

From the discussion above, a conclusion could be easily made that both CP and PP play vital roles not only in euphemistic expressions but our language communication. In some cases, they may show up in the same context to make the language become more comfortable for the listener and avoid conflicts between the speaker and listener. To some extent, violating CP is following PP. CP and PP could cooperate and strengthen each other, making sentences more euphemistic and more acceptable.

4. Conclusion

Through analyzing the 10 examples of euphemisms used in the film *Forrest Gump*, the first research question, "how euphemisms can present characters' personality or social backgrounding in *Forrest Gump*?" has been solved. And through the discussion of part three, we could also answer the second question: the CP and PP could cooperate and strengthen with each other when euphemisms are employed. As far as the author is concerned, the limitation of this thesis is that data collection is not sufficient enough for conducting a euphemism study. Therefore, in the future study, the author will make more efforts to develop the limitation and study euphemism from more perspectives.

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