

Aspects of Taboos and Euphemisms in Women's Language

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Abstract This paper provides insight into some of the research findings regarding two main aspects of women's language, namely taboos and euphemisms. The main aim is to reveal topics that are considered as taboos, and the linguistic devices that women employ to express them. Exploring the motives that have given way to the creation of euphemisms we reached the conclusion that fear that people have of supernatural powers, superstitions and even the concern that we can cause offence to other human beings if we use a direct language, prevail among other reasons that account for their use. Furthermore, we will focus on the main areas that make a fertile ground for producing many euphemisms. We will be introduced to the lexicon of disease, death, sex and tabooed body-parts. The various ways euphemisms are conceptualized reflect directly the mindset and mentality of the community that uses them. Undoubtedly, euphemisms represent a wealth of vocabulary in oral culture. Thus, this topic is of a great interest for lexicographers, linguists and literatians.

Keywords: euphemism, taboo, women's language, motives, society.

1. Introduction

Variations in diverse languages beside other factors seem to be direct and significant products of the gender variable. The division of society into men and women, both being different and complex, is reflected in various forms in language, which is the most important means of communication among them.

Problems or differences that occur in communication between men and women cross linguistic borders and take cultural, ethnic and psycho-social dimensions. Different language patterns seem to have originated in childhood, in the way they are raised, especially in the mentality and the nature of both sexes, who share common features but also differ in many others. As a result, distinct linguistic features seem to emerge and to be mainly employed by women.

Linguistic tools by which women convey ideas, thoughts and feelings reveal the truth about their social relationships and their social status that throughout the history placed them in peripheral position, and imposed on them rules and regulations. This is clearly reflected even nowadays in women's language that can be undoubtedly described in terms of hesitations and euphemisms

The word **euphemism** comes from the Greek word *euphemo*, meaning "auspicious/good/fortunate speech/kind" which in turn is derived from the Greek root-words *eu*, "good/well" + *pheme* "speech/speaking". To better understand what euphemisms represent in language and why they are seen as inseparable aspect of women's language, we will refer to the Albanian scholar Cabej(1978: 17) who in his study *Some euphemisms of Albanian language* gives us a clear definition of them: "Euphemism consists in the fact that a creature, a thing, a concept, a figure of popular belief, an illness, etc., is avoided in some circumstances to be called by its own name, and its name is replaced with a different one, which comes close to covering the former."

A very interesting perspective of the human psyche can be gained from studying euphemisms used as a shield against the refusal of our friends, or at worst, against death. Many euphemisms unveil poetic creativity of ordinary people; they reveal the popular culture of any nation. These values are recognized by our scholar Cabej (1978) who states that euphemisms used in folk languages serve as bridges that

connect language with folklore. As Shkurtaĵ (1999:245) puts it: "euphemism is a linguistic phenomenon closely related to culture, tradition, mentality, social community...". Following we will see that taboos and euphemisms are not only part of the undeveloped societies or provincial environments. Instead, they represent a linguistic reality in developed western societies as well.

2. Motives for Using Euphemisms and Taboos

Euphemisms are motivated by taboos, norms and traditions of a society. *Taboo* (a borrowed word from Tongan, Austronesian language) means 'prohibition' because it was believed that it was dangerous for individual or society. This is a kind of social contract that exists in primitive and modern societies regarding the prohibition of using objects or their names. The reasons for such prohibitions are related to the animist mentality that identified objects and living things with their names (Memushaj,2006).

Hence many euphemisms are product of superstition that is based on the idea that words have the power to attract bad things (for example, names of diseases such as cancer are avoided). We can add to this list religious euphemisms that replace sacred words that should not be mentioned. Lexicologist S.I. Hayakawa (1990) stresses the idea that euphemisms are a product of the close connection that people make between the word and what is symbolized by it.

Fear of death evokes the same emotions for words related to it and it comes as a result of the fact that people associate symbols with things that they symbolize. Many people in English instead of saying *died* use expressions like '*passed away*', '*went to his reward*', '*departed*' or '*went West*'. In Japanese the word *shi* (meaning death) is homophone with number four. This coincidence results in confusing linguistic situations as people avoid the word "*shi*" when discussing numbers or prices, and instead use *yon*, a word of a different origin.

In his extensive treatise on euphemisms Çabej (1978) explains that they emerge out of the fear and shame, fear of hurting each other's feelings or breaking the rules of society. They are used to hide unpleasant or embarrassing ideas even in those cases where the direct words are not necessarily offensive. These kinds of euphemisms are mostly used in public relations and politics. Sometimes there is a sign of equality between euphemism and politeness. So, they are considered as features of a cultured, soft and refined language. Euphemisms are considered as typical features of women's language for the very fact that it tends to remain clear and polite.

The belief that women's language is more polite and more refined-in a word, more ladylike-is very widespread and has been current for many years. Presumably there have always been taboos on language, but it looks as if the courtly tradition of the Medieval Ages, who put women on a pedestal, strengthened the linguistic taboos in general, and condemned the use of vulgar language by women, and its use by men in front of women. Jespersen (1922:246) on the issue of offensive words writes: "There are great differences with regard to swearing between different nations; but I think that in those countries and in those circles in which swearing is common it is found much more extensively among men than among women: this at any rate is true of Denmark."

Avoidance of swearing and of 'coarse' words is held up to female speakers as the ideal to be aimed at. It is clear that people have long thought that men and women differ as to the use of taboo expressions. However, we should mention here that women, as well as men, know all those words and phrases but avoid them on purpose. It may be that the women use off-color or indelicate expressions too, but these are isolated cases and cannot be regarded as typical of women's language. As far as taboo language is concerned we can affirm that it is not only represented by swearing. Words dealing with anatomy and sex (and even words that merely suggest them) have the same connotation.

Women in the nineteenth century could not say *breast* or *leg*, even when it came to chickens, so instead terms as *white meat* or (black meat) were used. It is a well- known fact that women all over the world find it embarrassing to mention some parts of the body or normal physiological functions in direct words that men prefer to use when they are with one another. Women, therefore, create words and euphemistic expressions.

In Pinero's entitled "The Gay Lord Quex," a lady discovers some French novels on the table of another lady and says: "This is a little-h'm-Isn't it?"- she does not dare to say the word "indecent", and has to express the idea in an inarticulate language. The word "naked" (nude) is paraphrased in the following description by a woman of the work of girls in ammunition works: "They have to take off every stitch from their bodies in one room and run *in their innocence and nothing else* in another room where the special clothing is."(quoted in Jespersen, 1922:246).

Jespersen (1922:246) stresses the idea that women exercise a great and universal influence on

linguistic development through their instinctive shrinking from coarse and gross expressions and their preference for refined (and in certain spheres) veiled and indirect expressions. In most cases that influence will be exercised privately and in the bosom of the family; but there is a historical example where a group of women worked in that direction collectively and publicly (we refer here to the French ladies who in the seventeenth century gathered in the hotel The Rambouillet and are generally known under the name Precieuses). They discussed matters of orthography and pronunciation and vocabulary purity, and favoured all kinds of elegant paraphrases by which coarse and vulgar words might be avoided.

It is to be emphasized that the issue of euphemism and taboo words is not simply limited to the framework of a language. Instead, it goes beyond it and gains a wider social dimension. Hayakawa (1990) explained that taboos may cause serious problems, since they prevent us from talking openly about sexual issues. Social workers, with whom he has dealt with this issue, report that high school students who have sexually transmitted diseases or are pregnant are almost completely ignorant of the most basic facts about sex and reproduction. Their ignorance is related to the fact that both they and their parents lack the vocabulary with which to discuss these issues: non-technical vocabulary of sex is to be more harsh and shocking to use, whereas the medical and technical vocabulary is unknown for them. Social workers believe that the first step to be taken to help these young people includes a linguistic aspect: students are to be taught the vocabulary with which they can talk about their problems before further help. As we noticed euphemisms shape our social behavior and relationships and sometimes the consequences have serious implications, as in the case mentioned above. Considering the aforementioned arguments we can naturally come to the conclusion that it is mostly women who are prone to the use of euphemisms. This finding is supported by writers such as Çabej that finds them mainly in women's language, and Lakoff (1975:55) who holds the view that women don't use off-color or indicate expressions; women are experts at euphemism.

3. Objective of the Study

The objective of this study was to identify the categories of female speakers that frequently use euphemisms and also to identify the main areas that abound in euphemistic expressions.

4. Materials and Method

Given the fact that euphemisms represent primarily the oral culture, the materials used to collect them are part of the spoken language. We also made use of written texts that specifically illustrate the areas of lexicon that tend to be euphemized. The collection of data was based on the questionnaire designed by the researcher Shkurtaj. The questionnaire was used in the city of Vlora and the regions nearby. The sample consisted of 100 female speakers. The age group of the sample included 18-25 years, 26-35 years and over 36 years of age. They belonged to various professions and cultural background. The geographical spread in both the city and in the village is justified because the position of woman, her mindset is not perceived at the same socio-cultural level in these two sites, which have differences and development specifications. As we already know these factors affect the way women speak and the linguistic devices they employ to express themselves.

For the first two age groups the questions were approached in a written form, while the third age group, where the subjects reached age 60 and 70 years the questionnaire was conducted verbally.

5. Findings

At the end of it we could conclude the following data: First, it is the undeniable fact that the use of euphemisms is not related only to gender variable, it is closely related to other factors such as education, culture, social class. Therefore, they are typical of those environments where women have a secondary role in society, where the mindset and mentality suppress the freedom of expression and communication of ideas. Unlike the neighboring areas, where the above positions are compelling, in the city women exercise more freedom of expression. However, it can not be said that the latter do not use euphemisms as shield against a language that can be offensive, which could hurt the feelings of the others or because of superstition.

Our findings supported the idea of Shkurtaj (1999:245) who claims that "... as a category of vocabulary in Albanian, as in other languages, they have undergone a significant decrease for reasons connected precisely with the development and changes in spiritual and cultural world of the Albanians in

cities and across villages ". This accounts for the fact it was mainly older generation the one that served us as a source of information on euphemisms.

A completely different situation occurs among young people where not too often we notice in their daily speech the use of euphemisms. Young people, mainly aged 18, had little knowledge of euphemisms with the exception of subjects who lived at home with their grandmothers and, being exposed to the language of women of that generation, they had unwittingly made euphemistic expressions part of their language. However, given the social developments in both technology and science, this generation seems to be far from the effects of superstition and fear that arise from them, so they do not hesitate to mention the names of various diseases, including the word death and its lexical field. The only area where you can notice the use of euphemistic terms is that of sexuality and the physiological processes associated only with male and female body. We observed a general tendency for creating new euphemisms that describe phenomena that are becoming more popular these years in the Albanian reality. To mention some of them as: *go to open Facebook* (meaning go to the toilet), *film me luftë* (war movie), *mësimet e frengjishtes* (French lessons) for "porn movies". Homosexuals are referred to as *anëtar i shoqatës* (a member of the association), *motra* (sister), *froç* (borrowed from Italian), *pede, bur* (meaning man but the standart is burre, double r), *ata të krahut tjetër* (those of the other side), *gay* etc..

6. The Lexicon of Disease, Death, Tabooed Body-Parts and Sexuality

Following we will be introduced to several euphemisms in areas where they are densely encountered in the women's language.

A very rich area in euphemisms is that of diseases. People think that by calling them with different names will make them disappear. Serious and dangerous diseases such as epilepsy is avoided by using euphemisms such as *ajo e fëmijës* (that of the child), *ajo e tokës* (that of the earth), *sëmundje e tokës* (the earth disease), *e liga e botës* (the evil of the world), *ajo e bardha* (the white one), *e uruara* (the blessed one). In English we encounter *falling sickness, evil falling, flapping sickness*.

There is a tendency to use euphemisms like soothing words to best deal with these diseases. Thus, for cough there exist euphemisms such as *kollë e mirë* (whooping cough), *white cough*, mumps are called *the beauty ones*, while the word *li* (smallpox), as noted by E. □abej (1978), comes from Greek and means blessing. Nowadays it has become a unique name and synonyms associated with it are *good* and *white*.

It seems that one of the most serious diseases such as cancer makes a fertile ground for producing many euphemisms in Albanian and in English: *sëmundje e rëndë, sëmundje e keqe, sëmundje e pashërueshme* (a long / prolonged, incurable illness), *neoplasia, neoplastic process. The big C, CA*.

The verbal taboos surrounding sickness can have other motivations too. For example, some euphemisms seem to reflect the cooperative desire not to impose one's trouble on others. People talk about being *unwell* rather than being *ill*.

A variety of euphemistic phrases characterizes women's language when talking about death. That is because people do not want to hurt the family, but also because there is a belief according to which citing the name of the dead soul would trouble him. Therefore, whenever one's mentions the dead, they add the expression *may be rest in peace*. In the older generation the verb *vdij* (died) is replaced by euphemisms such as *iku, vate* (went), *na la lamtumirën* (left), *humbi jetën* (lost one's life), *vajti te të parët* (met the parent), *ndërroj jete* (passed away), *la uratën* (passed on).

If the conversation between women comes to a dead, they do not mention the name but replace it with euphemisms, adjectives or names that indicate quality: *meiti* (dead meat), *i ndjeri* (deceased), *i mërguari* (departed), *riniçezë* (departed youth).

Sometimes, under cover of euphemism, people take an ironic attitude to dead people by saying: *po ha dhë* (checking out the grass from underneath), *flë të madhin* (sleeping the big sleep) *bukë për krimba* (worm food), *thun qafën* (popped their clogs), *cofi* (croaked).

Another area that abounds in euphemisms is that of sexuality, which is closely associated with taboo words that are unacceptable for the vocabulary of women. Thus, instead of the names of some male and female body parts associated with the genitalia or gender relations women use different periphrastic or euphemistic names. In conversations with the children they use *baby talk* to avoid genital respective names and verbs that express everyday organic needs: *bird, chick, grapes, peach, plum, friend, sparrow, cock, hen*. As it can be noticed the genitalia of both sexes are likened unto animals. In specialized medical facilities Latin words are mainly used like *penis* and *vagina*. Young people, in turn, associate them with familiar characters in animated films as *Fiona* (for the female body) and *Shrek* (for the male organ).

On gender relations women use verbal compound words: *sleep with her husband, fall into bed, have a*

good time, go to bed with, make it, make love with.

We can identify these categories of menstruation:

1. Illness or discomfort: *jam sëmurë* (became sick), *jam pa qejf* (unwell, under the weather), *më dbemb stomaku* (have stomachache).
2. Periodicity: Neutral euphemisms recent and most used in Albanian and English are: *jam me perioda* (I've got / I'm Having my period), *jam me të përmuajshmet* (It's that time of the month).
3. A Guest: *kam miq* (to have a visitor), the littlest sister's here
4. Colour red: *më ka ardhur halla nga Vithkuqi* (my aunt / grandma is here from Red Creek, Red Bank). Euphemism for pregnancy include: *pret një fëmijë* (be expecting), *s'i preket punë me dorë* (be in a delicate condition), *është bavale me vete* (be in trouble), *me miell në thes* (be with child), *po na shton* (in the family way).

7. Conclusion

Euphemisms and taboos are the most important aspects of women's language that differs significantly from that of the other gender. This does not exclude the fact that men do not use them, but a good knowledge of different social cultures makes us understand that social regulators governing codes of conduct are more compelling to women. There are high expectations for women to use always a careful, elegant, refined language and not to 'threaten' to mention taboo topics.

The very different motives that lead to the creation of euphemisms reveal the true complex nature of human beings, their understanding and the rich ideological conceptions; therefore, in addition to being property of women's language, they remain an essential part of any language.

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