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"EUPHEMISM" AS A COMMUNICATION STYLE IN IGBO CULTURE

ONYEKA, CLEMENTINA UKAMAKA
Department of English,
National Institute for Nigerian Languages, Aba, Nigeria
beautyclems2021@gmail.com
Phone: 08064421223
&
ASUZU IFEOMA
Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages
National Institute for Nigerian Languages, Aba, Nigeria
Abia State, Nigeria.
ifeomaadimike@gmail.com
Phone: 07067661771

Abstract

Euphemism refers to the substitution of an inoffensive expression for one that may offend or suggest something unpleasant. This paper examines euphemism as a communication style in English Language. It aims at exploring the use of euphemism as a means of communication in the Igbo Culture. The objectives of this study are: to understand the meaning of euphemism and its use in Igbo language, to identify the different examples of euphemism in Igbo language, as well as to discover the different purposes or occasions where they are used in Igbo culture. The data for this study were gathered through interview of some aged people and review of related literature. There is also introspection of the researchers who are native speakers of Igbo culture. The descriptive approach to language study was also adopted. The study found out that euphemisms are used by Igbo people for different purposes such as reference to death, disease, child birth/ pregnancy, people's characters and attributes, reference to harmful animals and in concealing of information. From the findings, it is observed that the Igbo language has rich euphemistic expressions which are used to avoid speaking directly about sensitive topics. One can therefore deduce that euphemisms exist in the Igbo language like in other languages as a means of replacing sensitive topics with inoffensive expressions. The study concludes that euphemism is a very rich figure of speech in Igbo culture and researchers are encouraged to go into this area of study for further research.

Keywords: Euphemism, Communication Style, Igbo Culture.

Introduction

Communication is an important means used by human beings to maintain social relationships. During the process of communication, in order to avoid the language from being too straightforward and avoid doing harm to the hearer, people make use of euphemisms. It is always difficult to communicate sad news or a negative opinion to others. Therefore, this figure of speech helps one to avoid this challenge. It is an issue of Sociolinguistics used in both past and contemporary society since it is the language behavior of a group of people. It is a word or series of words which replaces sad, unpleasant or shocking ideas with softer and nicer expressions. It can be defined as the substitution of an

inoffensive expression for one that may offend or suggest something unpleasant. It is more than just a way to avoid crude language. Simply put, it is a word or phrase used in place of another word that is considered more impolite or taboo. It allows people to talk about difficult concepts without being rude or vulgar. It is a proper language style that people pursue in social communication in order to reach an ideal communication effect. It is a cross-linguistically phenomenon which exists mainly on spoken languages than on written languages. As a result of this, as a language phenomenon, it plays a vital role in both spoken and written forms of communication. This is because the written form tends to be more conservative than the spoken form.

According to Holder (2008, p. 65), the term 'euphemism' is derived from the Greek word euphemo, meaning "speaking well". The latter is divided into eu, which means "good, well" and phemo, meaning "speech/speaking". According to Webster (1989, p. 428), the word originates from the Greek word euphēmismos, which also stems from euphēmos auspicious, sounding good, from eu- + phēmē speech, from phanai to speak. Euphemisms are thus mild, polite, or disguised universally accepted statements used to express something harsh or disagreeable. They are means of clothing ugly news or things in pleasant or beautiful expressions. For Nypson (2006), they are used to tone down the seriousness, severity or tragedy of situations. It arises from the need to maintain tact in conversations. This term is a universal, linguistic and cultural phenomenon which has been studied in different perspectives such as Cognitive Linguistics, Sociolinguistics and Morphology. It is used in several topics which include sexual activity, sex organs, bodily functions such as defecation and urination. It can also be used in reference to death, aspects of religion and money to avoid embarrassment in communication. Also, it is used to avoid using taboos in communication. Thus, taboos and politeness are generally accepted to be the most important motivators for the use of euphemism. They are primarily used in conversation and their functions evoke a relationship of reciprocal coordination between the speaker's intention and the hearer's reception of this strategy. However, it is the speaker who exercises total control over this coordination, since it is up to him to use a euphemism or to decide on a direct designation. In this sense, a specific intention underlies the use of a euphemism, which generally concerns its reception by the hearer (Ren & Yu, 2013).

Every language uses Euphemisms and Igbo language is not left out. Thus, the creation and usage of euphemism is a common phenomenon in human language. This is because it is used in certain community and is influenced by social-cultural factors. Thus, it is heavily marked with social-cultural features. Speakers of the Igbo language like speakers of other languages consciously switch to the use of euphemistic expressions instead of directly referring to above mentioned topics. This is to avoid breaking the language rules of the Igbo culture and also avoid making use of taboo expressions as well as touchy and controversial subjects. The prevalent euphemisms in Igbo language are negative euphemisms. Thus, this research work aims at examining "Euphemism" as a communication style in Igbo culture. It will examine how Igbo people communicate among themselves using euphemism in order to avoid sensitive topics and will in so doing, contribute to knowledge.

Conceptual Review

Concept of Euphemism

According to Abrantes (2005, p. 86), euphemism is a word or a phrase used in a specific linguistic and extra-linguistic context to soften or conceal something unpleasant. McGlone and Batchelor (2003) have proved that euphemistic use basically serves self-presentational purpose, protecting the speaker's positive self without much concern for the other's discomfort.

Concept of Igbo

Igbo refers to a people who are indigenes of Nigeria. According to Adibe (2009), Igbo is a major tribe in Nigeria and occupy the South Eastern states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo, as well as parts of Delta, Akwa-Ibom and Rivers states in the South-South region of Nigeria. Following Rafiu and Adekunle (2020), Igbo belongs to the Kwa language Family.

Concept of Culture

Taylor (2007) defines culture as a complex whole that includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. Ramiah (2006) defines culture as a valuable treasure that distinguishes humans from other forms of life in the universe.

Concept of Communication

Pearson & Nelson (2000) defines Communication as the process of understanding and sharing meaning. Weekley (1967) states that the root of the word "Communication" in Latin is Communicare, which means to share or to make common. Thus, it deals with sharing of information.

Concept of Style

Riffaterre (1959) defines style as the emotive element of language which is added to the neutral presentation of message. Here, style is seen as a way of expressing content of the mind. It is a general manner of doing something which is typical of a writer. Stendhall School of thought (1971) defines style as a means of formulating our thoughts with maximum effectiveness. Here, style is a set of individual characteristics, selection and arrangement of linguistic items that call attention to themselves and create an impact on the audience.

Review of Related Literature

Many critics and scholars have shown different views concerning the concept of Euphemism. According to Samoskaite (2011, p.4), "the need for euphemisms is both social and emotional, as it allows discussion of 'touchy' or taboo subjects (such as sex, personal appearances or religion) without enraging, outraging or upsetting other people". It also acts as a pressure valve whilst maintaining the appearance of civility. It is always associated with taboo language. It is usually employed in conversational situations to avoid taboo language.

Omachonu (ed.) (2011, p. 222) defines it as "when a speaker uses soft words to express an unpleasant truth in order to avoid confrontation or being offensive". It uses mild words in addressing unpleasant and taboo words. Moreover, sex, so long as the Nigerian sociolinguistic context is concerned, remains a taboo topic that is not discussed openly.

Chamizo Dominguez and Sánchez Benedito (2005, p.8) argue that apart from the main function of euphemism which is to conceal or veil something unpleasant, it also serves other minor functions that may be itemised as follows: (a) the politeness or respect function, (b) the dignifying function, (c) the function of attenuating a painful evocation, (d) the function of naming the taboo object.

For Cruse (2006, p. 57), "euphemism is an expression that refers to something that people hesitate to mention lest it causes offence, but which lessens the offensiveness by referring indirectly in some way". Here, it refers to the act of speaking in indirect manner in order to avoid offending anyone. It also acts on taboos that the speaker (s) attempts to tone down the effects of an expression on the listener.

Crespo (2005, p. 79) states that euphemism is "a more general phenomenon that participants in communicative exchanges employ with the purpose of softening the effects of what they really wish to communicate, avoiding as much as possible, offence and conflict". Though not quite different from other scholars' views on euphemism, implied in Crespo's conjecture is the idea that any linguistic unit or verbal strategy which tries to avoid conflict in interpersonal communication can be said to be euphemistic.

Theoretical Studies

Many theories have been used by different scholars in the analysis of euphemism. Some of these theories include Ethnography of Communication, Theoretical Paradigm of Goffan's face-work and Descriptive Approach. These theories are discussed as following:

a. Ethnography of Communication

Hymes (1964, p. 160) states that "Ethnography of Communication is the analysis of communication within the wider context of the social, cultural practices and beliefs of the members of a particular culture or speech community". It studies the interactions amid the certain members of a particular culture or a particular speech community, which has its own speaking codes and norms within the society. The approach foregrounds locally situated means and meanings of communication as its primary analytical concern.

b. Theoretical Paradigm of Goffan's face-work

Goffman (1967) defines face as the positive public image which one seeks to establish in social interactions. He also said that an individual is emotionally attached to the face they have constructed for social situations and feel good when their face has been protected and maintained. He also states that it is a mix of self-respect and consideration towards others that obliges us to preserve our own face and the face of others in social situations. However, he also highlights that face-work is not a natural state for human beings but rather is a 'working state'. That is why it is known as face-work.

c. Descriptive Approach

The descriptive approach refers to the method of analyzing and documenting languages as they are actually spoken or written by native speakers, without imposing prescriptive rules or judgments about correctness. For Allport (1983), descriptive linguistics focuses on observing and recording the patterns and structures of language, including phonology (sounds), morphology (word formation), syntax (sentence structure), semantics

(meaning) and pragmatics (language use in context). It tries to find out how language is used comprehensively, accurately and systematically.
However, in all these theories which can be used in the analysis of euphemism, Descriptive Approach to Language Study was adopted for the analysis of "*Euphemism" as a Communication Style in Igbo Culture.*

Empirical Studies

Studies have been carried out on Euphemism as a communication style and figure of speech in different languages. For Ofoegbu, Cyril Okechukwu & Okoli, Chukwunonyelum Esther in their work on *Morphological Analysis of Euphemistic Expressions in Igbo language,* Euphemism applies in many aspects of Igbo in great numbers and it is grouped into three different categories which include: items, humans and expressions. Some instances of items include:

1. Mbà amā onye ukwu
   Town know Neg person great
   „Commercial bus"
2. Akpùlụ àchìa
   Sip laugh
   „a strong local gin" .

   Some instances of humans include
3. Ahịa àkpà
   Market bag
   „a man married a woman who"s not known to him"
4. Òbi nwaànyi nà-àchị
   Homestead woman Aux-rule
   „chronic womanizer"
   Some instances of Expressions include
5. I-gwē kà osè
   Inf-grind like pepper
   „to deal with someone seriously"
6. Ị-bò ochīè nà ọhụụ̄
   Inf-revenge old Conj new
   „to revenge/deal with someone".

According to Tomekyin Cecilia in her paper *The role of Euphemisms in Nzema Language and Culture*. According to her,

> Euphemism interacts with style and each certain style defines the set of euphemisms which are conventional within that style (Allan &Burridge, 2007; cited in Bakhtiar, 2012). … However, in order not to heighten the condition of the person, a euphemism intervenes by 'clothing' a vulgar language that may be used. In this regard, a courteous Nzema and Akan speaker would not refer to a mad person as ɛzɛlɛ (Nzema) and bɔdam (Akan), rather an Nzema speaker would say ɔnde kpɔkɛ, 's/he is ill'. An Akan on the other hand would say ɔwɔ adwenem haw, 's/he has brain impairment'. In the same vein an Nzema and Akan speaker would talk of a blind person as ɔ nye le wulera and ɔyare n'ani, 's/he is suffering from the eye' respectively and not anyezinleravolɛ (Nzema) and

n'ani afura (Akan), 's/he is blind'".

According to Ren Chi, Yu Hao on Euphemism from Sociolinguistics Perspective:

> "… the creation and usage of euphemism is a common phenomenon in human language. Because euphemism is used in certain community and is influenced by social-cultural factors, thus, it is heavily marked with social-cultural features.
>
> As a special language phenomenon, … . The use of euphemism varies with the gender, age, social status and occupation, etc., of the social members and euphemism covers various aspects of social culture, including social conventions, traditional morality, religion, social values and politics, etc., which shows that euphemism is deeply rooted in social culture. It is impossible to have a profound understanding of language without referring to social culture".

Theoretical Framework

The framework adopted in this paper is the descriptive approach to language study. The descriptive approach refers to the method of analyzing and documenting languages as they are actually spoken or written by native speakers, without imposing prescriptive rules or judgements about correctness. Descriptive linguistics focuses on observing and recording the patterns and structures of language, including phonology (sounds), morphology (word formation), syntax (sentence structure), semantics (meaning) and pragmatics (language use in context). This approach to language study is when one tries to explain things how they actually are. It tries to find out how language is used comprehensively, accurately and systematically.

Summary of Literature Review

This paper begins with the background of the Study. The Literature Review consists of a Conceptual Review as well as Theoretical Studies of some scholars such as Ethnography of Communication, Theoretical Paradigm of Goffan's face-work and Descriptive Approach. There is also a look at some Empirical Studies on the work of some scholars on euphemism. This includes the works of Ofoegbu, Cyril Okechukwu & Okoli, Chukwunonyelum Esther on *Morphological Analysis of Euphemistic Expressions in Igbo language,* Tomekyin Cecilia on *The role of Euphemisms in Nzema Language and Culture* and *Ren Chi, Yu Hao on Euphemism from Sociolinguistics Perspective.*

From this review, it is evident that these scholars have not conducted any research on euphemism as a communication style in Igbo culture, using descriptive approach. Instead, these researchers have studied euphemism from other perspectives. For this reason, the present study is an attempt to account for euphemism as a communication style in Igbo, and in so doing, contribute to knowledge beyond what earlier critics have done.

Data Presentation and Analysis

In this section, there is presentation of data on euphemism which serves as communication style in Igbo, using descriptive approach. There are euphemisms in Igbo language which relate to the regular taboo topics such as sexual organs or sexual play, ethnic differences, disease, death, people's character or attributes in a polite way and also others which

conceal information especially when talking in public and Euphemism in reference to Harmful/ Dangerous Animals. Some examples of existing euphemisms in Igbo language are cited below based on the topics they apply to.

Disease Euphemisms

Euphemism is usually used in reference to some deadly diseases in Igbo language. The unknown sources of these diseases especially in the olden days, the lack of an absolute treatment for them and the association of these diseases with death, have led to an elusive language to mention them. Applying euphemistic expressions such as medical jargons and circumlocutions are common ways of avoiding this taboo topic. To avoid mentioning names of some contagious diseases, Igbo people resort to the following euphemistic expressions:

1. Ọ na arịa ọrịa mmìnwụ. (He is suffering from drier disease or tomorrow is too far). This means that "He is suffering from Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS)".
2. Ọ na arịa ọria ọcha. (He is suffering from white disease). This means that "He is suffering from leprosy".
3. O jighi ahụ. (He is not holding his body). This means that "He is ill".
4. Ọ na arịa nsị nwaanyị. (He is suffering from female poison or female disease). This means that "He is suffering from Female Sexually Transmitted Disease".
5. Ahụ ya ezughi oke. (His body is incomplete). This means that "He is physically handicapped".

Death Euphemisms

Death is also another area which evokes fear and nervousness. Discussion about death is a sensitive topic which requires tact and carefulness. For this reason, certain euphemistic expressions are used to refer to death. Usually, the language that is used to talk about death is created by virtue of euphemistic metaphors, metonyms and circumlocutions. Expressions with implicative meaning are widely used to refer to death in the most pleasant and decent way. Euphemism is used here to reduce possible pain and sadness as well as show sympathy for the deceased family, friends and relatives. Some examples of death euphemisms are as following:

6. Ọ nago. (He has gone back). This means that "He is dead".
7. Ọ nọghịzị n'uwaa. (He is no longer in the world). This means that "He is dead".
8. Ọ fego aka. (He has wave hand). This means that "He is dead".
9. Ọ bụlago akwụkwọ. (He has carried books home). This means that "He is dead".
10. Ọ na akwatu mmadụ. (He is felling human beings). This means that "He kills human beings".

Sex-Related Euphemisms

There are also different euphemisms which are used to talk about sex. With few exceptions, sex has always been considered a private matter and as such inappropriate to be discussed in public. Even in most western cultures where euphemisms are scarcely used, the mention of sex is however mostly prohibited. Nevertheless, since sex is such an essential part of life, pretending it does not exist by not talking about it is impossible. Therefore, in order to talk about sex in a way which will make one not to look irresponsible, these following euphemisms are used by Igbo people:

11.Ọ bụ ọnye nlarụ/ Ọ na- eje nlahụ. (She is a person that sleeps around). This means that "She is promiscuous".
12. Ọ naghị eji anya ahụ ụmụ nwọke. (She does not use her eyes to see men). This means that "She is promiscuous".
13. Ọ no n'elu ihe. (He is on top of a woman). This means that "He is having sexual intercourse".
14. Ọ na eri mmadụ. (He eats somebody.) This means that "He has sexual intercourse with somebody or some people".
15. Ọ bụ obi nwaanyi n'achị. (He is the homestead of Achị woman). This means that "He is a chronic womanizer".

    In addition, it is highly unacceptable in Igbo land to mentioning human private parts in an 'uncoated' language. Instead of mentioning these sexual organs of male and female (pennis and vagina), Igbo people make use of euphemistic expression and referred to these organs as "Ịfe gị".

Birth/ Pregnancy Euphemism

Another area of Igbo people which requires the use of euphemisms is the birth of a child or pregnancy. Among many cultures of the world especially the Igbo people, as a result of the fear that a pregnant woman might be hurt spiritually, they do not mention plainly that a woman is pregnant. Igbo people talk about pregnancy in the following way:

16. O bu tego afọ. (She has taken stomach). This means that "She is pregnant".
17. Ọ rịgolu go. (She has climbed up). This means that "She is pregnant".
18. O ri jugo afo. (She has eaten very well). This means "She is pregnant".

Among the Igbo people also, the way in which mentioning of pregnancy in a plain language was avoided is also the same way in which the announcement of a woman who has given birth was avoided. It was believed among the Igbo people that to announce the birth of a child meant inviting spiritual attack for the child. Therefore, the child was not taken out until about two weeks. Some do not even carry their babies out until she or he toddles. Therefore to inform a relative about the birth of a new born, the pregnant woman is described as:

19. Ọ rịtu go. (She has climbed down). This means that "She has given birth to a child".
20. O ri tego nwa. (She has been blessed with a child). This means that "She has given birth to a baby boy or girl".

Euphemisms referring to People's Character or Attributes in a Polite Way

Some Igbo euphemisms which refer to people's character or attributes in a polite way are presented below:

21. Ọ bụ ọnye aka ntụtụ. (He is a person with picky hands). This means that "He is a thief".
22. Ha bụ ndị abalị dì egwu. (They are those that night is afraid of). This means that "They are armed robbers".
23. Ọ bụ onye njenje. (She walks about a lot). This means that "She is a vagabond".
24. Ha bụ ndị ọfe mmanụ. (They are oily soup people). This means that "They are Yorubas".
25. Ọ bụ ọnye aka mkpị. (He is a person with a tightfisted hand). This means that "He is stingy".

    These character euphemisms talk about someone's attributes in a way that conceals information. They show the characteristics of an individual or group.

Euphemism in reference to Harmful/ Dangerous Animals

Igbo people believe that when certain harmful animals are called by their real names, especially at night, they will appear and attack the person mentioning their names. As a result of this, Igbo people make use of euphemism to mention such animals whenever the need arises. Some examples are stated as following:

26. Akpi (scorpion) is called Odogwu ọzara.
27. Agwọ (snake) is Ogologo ihe or Eriri.
28. Esu (Millipede) is called Mkpịsịodee.

Summary of Findings

Having studied the data for this study, the findings reveal that Igbo people make use of euphemisms in reference to diseases and all forms of infirmity as is presented in 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5. Euphemisms are also used by Igbo people in reference to death as is presented in 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10. Euphemisms are used by Igbo people to talk about sex as is presented in 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15. Euphemisms are also used by Igbo people in reference to child birth and pregnancy as is presented in 16, 17, 18, 19 and 20. Euphemisms are also used by Igbo people in reference to people's character and attributes as is presented in 21, 22, 23, 24 and 25. Euphemisms are also used by Igbo people in reference to harmful or dangerous animals as is presented in 26, 27 and 28.

These data reveal that these euphemistic expressions are used by Igbo people as a communication style in their daily lives. Igbo people make use of these euphemisms to talk about difficult concepts without being rude or vulgar. They also make use of euphemisms in order to avoid being direct in their communication processes where tact is needed.

Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to account for euphemism as a communication style in Igbo culture. It studies different works done by linguists and language experts on euphemisms, different theories which can be adopted in analysis of euphemisms, as well as presentation of some data for analysis. Euphemisms are used for different purposes such as reference to diseases, death, child birth and pregnancy, people's characters or attributes and harmful or dangerous animals. Euphemisms in Igbo function in the same way that euphemisms in other languages do. They view language as a tool that enables one have and keep secrets.

From the findings, we discovered that these euphemisms have deep meanings which are not seen on the surface level. Most of these euphemisms are philosophical and require deep thinking in order to understand their meanings. However, they are figurative language which can be used for communication purposes. This study has also contributed to the previous studies done by linguists and language experts on euphemism as a communication style in different languages of the world. It also recommends further research in this area of linguistics.

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