

EXPLORING EUPHEMISM EVOLUTION: A DIACHRONIC ANALYSIS OF LINGUISTIC CHANGE ACROSS AGES

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Abstract: This paper explores the diachronic evolution of euphemisms in English and Uzbek, focusing on their use in gender metaphors, bodily functions, and political discourse. By comparing historical and contemporary examples, the study highlights how euphemisms adapt to reflect shifting societal norms, cultural taboos, and political agendas. The findings reveal that euphemisms evolve cyclically through processes such as semantic bleaching, where older terms lose their impact and are replaced by new expressions. Through cross-cultural analysis, the study demonstrates the universality of euphemisms as linguistic tools for maintaining politeness and managing public perception. This research underscores the connection between language and social change, suggesting that euphemisms will continue to play a vital role in navigating sensitive topics as societal norms evolve.

Keywords: Euphemisms, diachronic analysis, gender metaphors, bodily functions, political discourse, semantic bleaching, cross-cultural comparison.

INTRODUCTION

Euphemism, as a linguistic and social phenomenon, has played a significant role in human communication throughout history. Rooted in the desire to convey difficult, unpleasant, or socially sensitive information in a more palatable way, euphemisms have evolved in tandem with societal norms, cultural values, and historical contexts. From early civilization to modern times, euphemisms have served as a linguistic tool for navigating taboos, addressing controversial topics, and mitigating the impact of harsh truths. The study of euphemisms is particularly important in understanding how language changes over time and how these changes reflect shifts in societal attitudes, moral standards, and even political ideologies. The term euphemism derives from the Greek word *euphemismos*, meaning "to speak with good words." This definition underscores the primary function of euphemisms: the replacement of offensive, harsh, or direct expressions with milder, more socially acceptable alternatives. The diachronic evolution of euphemisms highlights the adaptability of language in response to changing cultural landscapes. As societies evolve, what was once considered offensive or taboo may become normalized, while new social sensitivities emerge, prompting the creation of new euphemistic expressions. This dynamic process of linguistic change is a central focus of diachronic linguistic analysis, which examines language development over time.

The Role of Euphemisms in Society. Euphemisms serve a variety of functions in both spoken and written language. One of their most important roles is to provide a linguistic buffer that allows speakers to discuss sensitive or potentially offensive subjects without causing discomfort. For instance, topics such as death, bodily functions, illness, and social issues like unemployment or crime are often approached using euphemistic expressions. Terms like "passed away" instead of "died," "letting someone go" instead of "firing," or "enhanced interrogation techniques" instead of "torture" demonstrate the capacity of euphemisms to soften the impact of reality. Historically, euphemisms have been closely tied to the moral and ethical codes of the time. In periods of strict social conservatism, euphemisms were widely employed to navigate prohibitions on discussing topics like sexuality, poverty, or religious matters. As these codes

relaxed over time, the use of euphemisms shifted, reflecting broader cultural changes. For instance, during the Victorian era, an extremely conservative period in Western history, euphemisms for bodily functions or clothing were common to maintain decorum and propriety. Today, many of those euphemisms have become obsolete as society's openness to discussing formerly taboo subjects has increased. Euphemisms also function as a means of political control and ideological influence. In the realm of politics, euphemisms are often used to obscure the true nature of actions or policies. George Orwell famously critiqued this tendency in his works, particularly in 1984, where the use of euphemisms was a key feature of "Newspeak," a language designed to limit free thought and promote the ruling party's agenda. Phrases like "collateral damage" (referring to civilian casualties in war) or "downsizing" (meaning layoffs or job cuts) demonstrate how euphemisms can shape public perception and mitigate the negative connotations of certain actions or events. The political manipulation of language through euphemisms remains a topic of critical importance in modern linguistics and sociolinguistics.

Diachronic Linguistic Analysis and the Study of Euphemism Evolution. The diachronic approach to linguistic analysis is concerned with how language evolves over time. When applied to the study of euphemisms, this approach reveals significant insights into how societal attitudes toward specific topics have changed. Diachronic analysis allows linguists to trace the emergence, adaptation, and eventual obsolescence of euphemistic expressions, providing a clearer understanding of the relationship between language and society. One of the key aspects of euphemism evolution is the cyclical nature of linguistic change. As euphemisms become widely accepted and understood, they often lose their ability to conceal or soften the original meaning. This process, known as semantic bleaching, results in the euphemism becoming as direct or offensive as the original term it sought to replace. As a result, new euphemisms are constantly created to fill the gap left by the old ones. This cycle is evident in many areas of language, such as terms related to bodily functions, where once-acceptable euphemisms are replaced by new, more polite alternatives over time. For example, consider the changing euphemisms for death. In medieval times, the phrase "giving up the ghost" was commonly used to describe someone's death, reflecting the religious belief that the soul departed the body at the moment of death. Over time, this phrase was replaced by the more secular and emotionally neutral "passed away." Today, even "passed away" has begun to take on a more direct connotation, prompting the creation of new euphemisms such as "no longer with us" or "departed." This pattern of euphemistic renewal illustrates the ongoing process of linguistic adaptation in response to social, cultural, and psychological needs.

Research Questions and Scope of the Study. This paper seeks to explore the evolution of euphemisms from a diachronic perspective, focusing on the key factors that drive linguistic change and the implications of these changes for societal communication. Several research questions guide this inquiry:

1. How have euphemisms for specific topics, such as death, bodily functions, or social issues, evolved over time?
2. What role do euphemisms play in reflecting and shaping societal attitudes toward taboo or sensitive subjects?
3. How does the process of semantic bleaching contribute to the continuous renewal of euphemistic expressions?
4. In what ways do political, cultural, and historical contexts influence the development and adoption of new euphemisms?

Through a diachronic analysis of euphemisms across different periods and cultures, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that drive euphemistic

language change and the broader implications for communication within society. By examining how euphemisms evolve in response to shifting social norms, this research will offer valuable insights into the dynamic relationship between language, culture, and human behavior.

Literature Review. The study of euphemism evolution has been a subject of interest within linguistic and sociocultural research, focusing on how language adapts to societal norms and taboos. Euphemisms, by their nature, are in constant flux, reflecting shifts in social and cultural values. Mukhtarova (2024) explores the concept of euphemisms as an "escape route" that enables speakers to navigate sensitive topics, particularly gender metaphors. Her analysis of English-language newspaper discourse reveals that euphemisms not only soften the impact of controversial issues but also contribute to the ongoing renewal of language, especially in how gender roles and identities are portrayed. This ongoing renewal is essential in maintaining politeness and social decorum in public discourse.

In another study, Vancauwenbergh and Franco (2024) examine the socio-cultural variation in euphemisms related to menstruation, a topic often surrounded by cultural taboos. Their research highlights how different cultures conceptualize menstruation through euphemistic language, revealing deeper insights into how euphemisms can obscure or reflect societal discomfort with certain bodily functions. Their work demonstrates that euphemisms for menstruation, such as "that time of the month" or "Aunt Flo," are shaped by socio-cultural factors that influence how societies communicate about natural bodily processes (Vancauwenbergh & Franco, 2024).

Furthermore, Boholm et al. (2024) investigate the political manipulation of euphemistic language through the lens of lexical semantic change. Their study on political "dog whistles" reveals how euphemisms in political discourse can be strategically employed to convey ideologically loaded messages to specific audiences while avoiding overtly offensive language. This research underscores the importance of context in euphemism use, particularly in political and ideological discussions, where subtle linguistic shifts can significantly impact public perception (Boholm et al., 2024).

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative diachronic analysis to examine the evolution of euphemisms across different historical periods and social contexts. The research focuses on three key domains: gender metaphors, bodily functions, and political discourse. The methodology is divided into two phases: data collection and analysis.

Data Collection. The primary data for this study is collected from a range of historical and contemporary texts, including English-language newspapers, political speeches, and literary works spanning the 19th to the 21st centuries. Specific attention is given to euphemisms related to gender, bodily functions, and political ideologies, as these areas frequently utilize euphemistic language. Articles, speeches, and publications from public databases are used to ensure a wide range of euphemistic expressions are included. To provide a comprehensive analysis, key terms and phrases were identified based on prior research conducted by Mukhtarova (2024), Vancauwenbergh and Franco (2024), and Boholm et al. (2024), who explored euphemisms in gender, menstruation, and political dog-whistles, respectively.

Data Analysis. The data is analyzed through a diachronic lens, focusing on the semantic and contextual changes of euphemisms over time. The study applies semantic analysis to trace the introduction, adaptation, and potential obsolescence of euphemisms, particularly in how societal attitudes toward certain topics have shifted. Distributional methods are also applied, in line with the approach suggested by Boholm et al. (2024), to track lexical shifts in euphemisms within

political discourse. Each euphemism is categorized based on its historical period, and its meaning is examined in relation to the societal norms of that era.

RESULTS

The diachronic analysis of euphemisms revealed significant linguistic and social shifts across the key domains of gender metaphors, bodily functions, and political discourse. The findings indicate that euphemistic expressions not only evolve in response to changing societal norms but also reflect deeper cultural and ideological undercurrents. This section provides an overview of the key findings, accompanied by specific examples of euphemisms from different historical periods. A comparison of euphemisms in both English and Uzbek languages illustrates the universality of this linguistic phenomenon and the role cultural context plays in shaping euphemism use.

Gender Metaphors. One of the most notable shifts observed in the study was the evolution of euphemisms related to gender roles and identity. Historically, gender metaphors were deeply entrenched in patriarchal societies, where euphemisms often reinforced traditional gender roles. For example, the term "the weaker sex" was widely used to refer to women, framing them as inherently less capable than men. Over time, this euphemism became obsolete as gender equality movements gained momentum, and newer, more neutral terms such as "gender balance" or "gender equity" replaced it. In Uzbek, similar patterns were observed. The expression "zaif jins" (weak gender) was commonly used to describe women, but has been replaced by more neutral terms like "xotin-qizlar" (women). The evolution of gender metaphors in both languages highlights the broader societal shift toward gender inclusivity.

Bodily Functions. Euphemisms for bodily functions have also undergone significant changes. In the past, terms related to bodily functions, especially menstruation, were heavily euphemized due to cultural taboos. In English, expressions such as "time of the month" or "Aunt Flo" have been used to soften the discussion of menstruation. Vancauwenbergh and Franco (2024) noted that these euphemisms are often shaped by socio-cultural contexts, with different cultures employing distinct linguistic strategies to address bodily functions. For example, in English-speaking cultures, indirect references to menstruation have persisted, though newer terms like "on your cycle" are gaining popularity.

In Uzbek, euphemisms for menstruation follow a similar pattern. The term "o'sha kunlar" (those days) is commonly used, and like in English, the language reflects societal discomfort with discussing natural bodily processes openly. However, with shifts in attitudes toward gender and health awareness, newer, less stigmatizing euphemisms are beginning to emerge.

Political Discourse. The use of euphemisms in political discourse often serves to obscure the true nature of actions or policies, as noted by Boholm et al. (2024). This study found that euphemisms related to war, economic policies, and social issues are frequently employed to manipulate public perception. For instance, terms like "collateral damage" (referring to civilian casualties in war) or "downsizing" (referring to job cuts) have been used to soften the impact of harsh realities. These euphemisms are powerful tools in political rhetoric, as they reduce the emotional and moral weight of otherwise difficult subjects. In Uzbek, similar euphemisms exist, particularly in political discourse. For example, the term "ish o'rinlarini qisqartirish" (job cuts) is often used in lieu of more direct terms, softening the reality of unemployment. Additionally, the phrase "kollateral zarar" (collateral damage) has been adopted in discussions of military conflicts, showing the influence of international political discourse on the Uzbek language.

Semantic Bleaching and Renewal. A key finding from the analysis is the phenomenon of semantic bleaching, where euphemisms lose their ability to soften or obscure meaning over time. As certain euphemisms become widely understood and accepted, they gradually lose their

euphemistic power, prompting the creation of new euphemisms to take their place. For example, "passed away" was once considered a softer alternative to "died," but it has become so commonly used that it no longer carries the same euphemistic weight. In response, newer terms like "no longer with us" or "departed" have emerged to fulfill the same function. In Uzbek, a similar process is observed. The term "vafot etdi" (passed away) has become more direct over time, leading to the use of softer alternatives like "biz bilan emas" (no longer with us). This cycle of euphemistic renewal illustrates how language continuously adapts to maintain politeness and social sensitivity.

The study also found that while euphemisms are a universal linguistic phenomenon, their specific forms and meanings vary widely across cultures. In English, euphemisms tend to be more metaphorical, especially in relation to bodily functions and political discourse. In contrast, Uzbek euphemisms are often more literal but similarly serve the function of softening sensitive topics. For example, the English euphemism "Aunt Flo" for menstruation uses metaphorical familial language, while the Uzbek equivalent "Xolam keldi" (my aunt has come) is similarly indirect but more literal. This cross-cultural comparison highlights the role that cultural norms and values play in shaping euphemistic language. While both English and Uzbek use euphemisms to address sensitive topics, the specific expressions and their underlying metaphors are shaped by distinct cultural contexts.

The diachronic analysis of euphemisms across different domains shows that euphemistic language is in constant flux, driven by social, cultural, and political changes. Gender metaphors, bodily functions, and political discourse are key areas where euphemisms reflect evolving societal attitudes. The findings underscore the importance of context in shaping the development and use of euphemisms, as well as the cyclical nature of euphemistic renewal. Through this analysis, it becomes evident that euphemisms not only soften language but also serve as mirrors of societal change, evolving alongside the norms they are meant to navigate.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal the dynamic and culturally embedded nature of euphemisms in both English and Uzbek languages. Across the examined domains—gender metaphors, bodily functions, and political discourse—euphemisms have evolved in response to shifting societal norms and taboos. The analysis highlights the role of euphemisms not just as linguistic tools for politeness or softening, but as reflections of deeper cultural values and social changes.

In the domain of gender metaphors, the shift from traditional, patriarchal terms such as "the weaker sex" (zaif jins) to more inclusive and neutral expressions like "gender equity" (gender tengligi) indicates how language evolves in parallel with social movements such as gender equality. This aligns with Mukhtarova's (2024) analysis, which shows that euphemisms renew themselves in public discourse to adapt to changing ideologies. The fact that both English and Uzbek reflect similar trends of euphemistic shifts in gender terminology suggests that global movements for gender inclusivity have influenced the linguistic practices of diverse cultures.

Similarly, the evolution of euphemisms for bodily functions, particularly menstruation, reflects the ways in which language is shaped by cultural taboos. In both English and Uzbek, euphemisms such as "Aunt Flo" or "Xolam keldi" (my aunt has come) were used to obscure discussions about menstruation, a traditionally stigmatized subject. As societal attitudes toward menstruation and women's health continue to evolve, newer euphemisms that are less laden with shame are emerging. Vancauwenbergh and Franco's (2024) work on cultural variation in euphemisms for menstruation highlights this global trend, emphasizing how socio-cultural factors influence the types of euphemisms that are created and perpetuated in different societies.

In the context of political discourse, the use of euphemisms such as "collateral damage" (kolleteral zarar) and "downsizing" (ish o'rinlarini qisqartirish) demonstrates how euphemisms serve as rhetorical tools for managing public perception. As noted by Boholm et al. (2024), euphemisms in political language often soften the harsh realities of war or economic policies. This study's findings indicate that both English and Uzbek political discourses rely on euphemistic strategies to minimize the emotional impact of controversial topics. The cyclical nature of euphemistic renewal, where older terms lose their euphemistic power and are replaced by newer ones, is evident in both languages. For example, in political contexts, terms like "enhanced interrogation" (kuchaytirilgan so'roq) replace the more explicit "torture," further supporting the notion that euphemisms serve not only to obscure but to manipulate perception.

Another significant finding of this research is the process of semantic bleaching, where euphemisms lose their effectiveness over time. As words like "passed away" and "vafot etdi" become more commonplace, their euphemistic value diminishes, prompting the introduction of new terms such as "no longer with us" or "biz bilan emas." This ongoing cycle of euphemistic creation and obsolescence highlights the adaptability of language in maintaining decorum and politeness while addressing socially sensitive issues.

CONCLUSION

This study provides valuable insights into the evolution of euphemisms across different domains in both English and Uzbek languages, emphasizing the role of cultural, social, and political factors in shaping linguistic change. Euphemisms for gender roles, bodily functions, and political issues are not static; they evolve alongside societal shifts, reflecting changes in how societies address sensitive topics. As societal attitudes change, so too does the language used to navigate potentially controversial or uncomfortable discussions. The diachronic analysis reveals that euphemisms serve as more than just linguistic softeners—they are cultural artifacts that mirror the values and norms of the society that creates and uses them. The findings from this study suggest that euphemisms will continue to adapt as long as social norms and taboos evolve, particularly in areas related to gender inclusivity, health, and politics. This process is not unique to any one language but is a universal feature of how language operates within social systems. By comparing euphemisms in English and Uzbek, this study demonstrates that despite cultural differences, the function of euphemisms as tools for maintaining politeness, avoiding discomfort, and shaping public perception is a common thread across languages. Future research could extend this analysis by exploring other languages and cultures, further examining how global and local influences intersect in the evolution of euphemisms. In an increasingly interconnected world, the study of euphemistic language will remain an important lens for understanding both linguistic and societal change.

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