

Investigating EFL Iraqi College Students' Awareness of Euphemistic Expressions

دراسة لمدى ادراك الطلبة العراقيين في استخدام العبارات التلطيفية

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1-INTRODUCTION

All over the world and in different societies and cultures , people are always looking for different ways of favourable , gentle smooth and soft communication .The 'powerful linguistic devices ' that are embedded in the daily English language is called "euphemism". It plays an important and vital role in daily communication. It represents a significant part of English . It is used to express any aspect of everyday realities such as the business world , mass media , etc. The comprehension of such realities can not be verified unless a reasonable command of euphemism is achieved.

Euphemism is defined according to various perspectives and views. It is " that figure of speech which consists in the substitution of a word or expression of comparatively favourable implication or less unpleasant associations , instead of the harsher or more offensive one that would more precisely designate what is intended"(Simpson and Weiner , 1989:210). It is " a word or phrase that is used in place of a disagreeable or offensive word or phrase" (Crystal,1987:8).Wardhaugh (1990:231) believes that euphemistic expressions are the substitution of non-committal , more pleasant or vague expression for one with unpleasant connotations or of less prestige . " They are words which are softer than the original ones" (Poole, 1999:119).

Alkire(2002:1) states that " for learners of EFL , euphemism is largely untaught ". There are different reasons behind this , one of which is that teaching euphemism through literature is in need of a professional teacher who has a sufficient knowledge of the cultural and social aspects of English.

The problem of euphemism arises from the fact that many of them are inherently vague or ambiguous . They can be problematic for they channel people's thinking along certain often incorrect lines. As far as the present study is concerned , it is limited to 1 st and 4 th stages undergraduate college students of the department of English at the College of Languages/ University of Baghdad for the academic year

2007- 2008 . The reason behind selecting 1st and 4th stage college students is to find out whether or not an academic study of 4 years has added something to the 1st stage students when reaching 4th stage, for college students have studied literature , novels , dramas , and other courses which are supposed to have added some knowledge about British English and its cultural aspects , specifically what concerns euphemistic expressions. The study is also limited to the following types of euphemistic expressions: 1- compounding 2- particularization 3- implication 4- metaphor 5- metonymy and 6- understatement.

The present study is an attempt to identify the real state concerning the Iraqi EFL college students' level in the aspect under study, to achieve a better understanding of euphemism in English , to hope that it helps Iraqi EFL learners at college level to be aware of using euphemism accurately and naturally , and to give an idea about the level of Iraqi EFL learners to college instructors. Therefore , this study is divided into two parts , theoretical and practical. Finally , the present study attempts to investigate using euphemistic British expressions by conducting a descriptive study through applying a test on the selected sample.

2- Aims and Hypotheses of the Study

The present study aims at:

- 1- Identifying the level of the 1st and 4th stage, Iraqi EFL college students at the departments of English in using euphemistic expressions , and
- 2- Finding out whether there are statistically significant differences between 1st and 4th stages Iraqi EFL college students' mean scores in using euphemistic expressions.

Four null hypotheses are postulated:

- 1- First and fourth stages' Iraqi EFL college students' level in using euphemistic expressions is below the average .
- 2- There are no statistically significant differences between 1st and 4th stages Iraqi EFL college student's totally correct answers mean scores in euphemistic expressions.
- 3- There are no statistically significant differences between the 1st and 4th stages samples in the partially correct answers in euphemistic expressions.
- 4- There are no statistically significant differences between 1st and 4th stages samples in the total score of the test.

3- Types of Euphemism

Euphemism is divided into major and minor types .Among others, death, sex, disease, and occupation are considered major types , whereas place , instance of

social and industrial euphemisms , and instances of financial and economic euphemisms are considered minor types.

Euphemism is analysed into formal innovation , and semantic innovations. The formal innovation includes word formation devices(compounding, derivation, blends, acronym, onomatopoeia) , phonemic modification (back slang, rhyming slang , phonemic replacement, abbreviation), and loan words. While the semantic innovation includes particularization , implication , metaphor , metonymy , reversal, understatement, and overstatement (Warren,1992:4).

In the present study , the following types are used only:

1- Compounding:

It is one of the devices used in word formation . it refers to a linguistic unit which is composed of elements that function independently in other circumstances of a particular currency , e.g., 'good looking'(nice look), warm admiration(deep admiration, heartfelt),etc.

2- Particularization:

It means that a general term is used which is required to be "particularized" within the context to make sense , e.g., sizes(body shape), object (target).

3- Implication:

It is a logical construction that essentially tells one if one condition is true then another condition must be true e.g., open your eyes (not to be ignorant of facts or events).

4- Metaphor:

It is a figure of speech in which a name or descriptive term is applied to a person or object to which is not literally acceptable . It is the use of words to indicate something different from the literal meaning e.g., " I will make him eat his words". or "He has a heart of stone".

5- Metonymy:

It is a type of semantic innovation and a figurative use of the name of one thing for that of another with which it is connected e.g., "kettle" to refer to " water" .

6- Understatement

It can be recognized by way of asking what unexpected communicative intention or motivation a speaker might have had for having issued an utterance . It is a statement that expresses an idea , e.g., sleep (die), not very bright (stupid , thick).

(Crystal,1987:421;Crystal,1997:78;Warren,1992:133;Hornby,1974:533; Hartmann and Stork,1972:141;Grambs,1984:56) .

5- Euphemism and Culture

Culture may be defined as what a society does think and behave, , i.e. the avoidance of offensive terms (Oatey,2001:2). Therefore , culture is that complex

whole which includes knowledge , belief , art , morals , law , custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society (Edwards, 1976:37) . It comprises inherited artifacts , goods , technical processes, ideas , habits and values (Gee,1999:66) . It consists of people's beliefs (religious , political) , institutions (legal, governmental), and technology (skills, equipment) (Gregg,1981:1). Wardhaugh(1990:230) believes that the relation between euphemism and culture is expressed in language . But language is used to avoid saying certain things as well as to express them. Certain things are not said , not because they can not be , but because people do not talk about those things , or if those things are talked about , they are talked about in very roundabout ways. Consequently as far as language is concerned certain things are not to be said or certain objects can be referred to only in certain circumstances. These are called "taboo" that is only one way in which a society expresses its disapproval of certain kinds of behaviors to be harmful to its members.

English has its taboo and most people who speak English know what these are and observe the rules (Coulmas,1997:85).Taboo and euphemism affect all people since few things need not to be talked about directly or to be expressed indirectly. There are different kinds of taboo in English such as death , love , human body and bodily functions, physical differences and mental handicap, women and pregnancy , ethic , sex , minorities , animals, religious words, names and kinship words , alcohol, etc. These are things that people do not talk about . People do not seem to see such things even if they stare right into their faces because they are taboo.

5- Purposes for Using Euphemism

The following are the purposes for using euphemistic expression stated by several authors:

- 1- Euphemistic expressions are used to soften the reality of what people are communicating to a given listener or reader.
- 2- Euphemistic expressions or words are employed to express what is socially difficult to express in direct terms.
- 3- By using euphemisms , people seek to disguise the real of un pleasant idea.
- 4- Euphemisms are usually used to soften a negative connotation.
- 5- Euphemisms are adopted to indicate the forbidden object without naming it.
- 6- Euphemistic words or expressions are used to talk about topics that may be regarded as distasteful.

- 7- Some euphemistic expressions are designed to prevent strong negative stereotypes from prejudicing a hearer.
- 8- People use euphemistic words or expressions to make something bad sound better.
- 9- To prevent unwanted connotations , some euphemistic words are used.
- 10 -It is a perfectly intelligent method of generating new and useful ways of perceiving things.

(Rawson,1981:512;Grambs,1984:790;Tyler,1978:338;Harris,2000:3 ;Richards,1978:17 ;Leech,1974:54 ;and Brown and Wright,1980:236).

6 - Procedures of the Study

6-1 Population and selection sample

The population consists of all Iraqi EFL college students studying at the departments of English at the university of Baghdad for the academic year 2007-2008 .

The sample of the study is randomly selected from the 1st and 4th th stage college students at the college of Languages . The total number of the subjects of the present sample is (80) male and female students ,(40) subjects from the 1st stage , and (40) from the 4th stage.

6-2 Description of the Test

The initial form of the test of the present study consist of 30 items , each includes a word or a phrase underlined and the testees are required to give a suitable meaning for each as they are used in the context given in the item. The type of the test is subjective.

The words and phrases are selected either from the testees prescribed textbooks or from the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, therefore , the test items are mainly constructed to find out the awareness of the testees of using euphemistic expressions. The scoring scheme of the present test is described as follows:

- 1- Two scores are given for the correct answer (see appendix2) . The testees' answers in this respect are limited to an answer sample prepared by the researcher.

2- One score is given to the answer which is partially similar to the correct one identified by the researcher. Here, if some of the words or expressions are found to be similar in meaning to the identified ones, they are considered correct but will gain one score only.

3- Zero is given to the incorrect answer .

The total score is 50 , the mean score is 25 , and the lower score is zero.

The second step in the construction of any test is to find out the validity of the items of the test , and in the present case the test is brought before to a jury* members of four experts in the field of EFL and linguistics who were asked to judge the face validity of the items and the list of vocabulary attached to it. The experts recommended the following points to be taken when producing the final form of the test:

1- Items no 5,16 ,17,26, and 30, are omitted from the test because they are agreed to be difficult or vague. The items read the following :

5- He is too full of the market. (thinking of money only)

16- The old lady is so pale.(colour of complexion , ill health)

17- He has been in no hurry with his congratulations. (in a hurry)

26- she was not unwilling to have other deceived.(willing)

30- This little girl is an angle.(will behave well)

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2- Asst. Prof.Dr. Dhuha Attallah Al- Qaraghooly , College of Basic Education.

3- Asst. Prof. Dr. Shaima Al- Bakri , College of Education / Ibn Rushd

4- Instructor Dr. Abbas Lutfi , College of Education / Ibn Rushd

2- Grammatical , printing , and spelling mistakes are corrected later on.

The agreement of jurors on the validity of the items of the test is calculated by using the percentage , where it is found out to be of 100% .

As a result , the final version of the test includes 25 items.

Concerning the reliability coefficient of the test , it is calculated by using the Kuder- Richardson formula 21. The coefficient is 0.77 which is considered acceptable according to Mehrens and Lehmann (1991:255).

In order to find out item analysis of the test , a pilot sample of 30 male and female students are randomly selected from the 1st stage undergraduate students . The following are found out from the item analysis process:

1- The difficulty level of the items ranged between 0.37 – 0.60.

2- The item discriminating power ranges between 0.32 – 0.77.

This indicates that the two ranges are acceptable according to Ebell (1972:399).

The average time needed to answer the test is (35) minutes . In the final administration of the test, the testees are supplied with the test sheet and the researcher explained the aim of the test in order to remove any ambiguity that might occur. Then the test sheets are gathered and after that corrected by the researcher. The results are found out by using two independent samples t- test formula .

7- Results, Conclusions, and Recommendations

7-1 Results

Results of the present study are introduced according to the aims and hypotheses stated earlier.

7.1.1 Results related to the first aim and the verification of the first null hypothesis

By using the one sample t-test formula* to state the level of 1st and 4th stage EFL Iraqi college students in using euphemistic expressions, it is found out that:

1. In respect of the 1st year sample, the mean score is found out to be 13.35, while the standard deviation is 6.91913. The computed t-value is 10.649, whereas the tabulated t-value is found out to be 2.021. Accordingly, the computed t-value is higher than the tabulated t-value on a level of significance of 0.05 and a degree of freedom of 39. This result shows that the student level is statistically below average and also below the theoretical mean which is 25. Therefore, the first null hypothesis is accepted since the difference between the tabulated t-value and the computed one is statistically significant. (see table 1).

$$* \quad T = \frac{\bar{x} - M}{s \sqrt{N}}$$

2. Regarding the 4th year sample, the mean score is 15.20, while the standard deviation is 6.25607. The computed t-value is found out to be 9.906, where as the tabulated t-value is 2.021. Therefore, the computed t-value is higher than the tabulated t-value on a level of significance of 0-05 and a degree of freedom of 39. This shows that the student's level is statistically below

average and also below the theoretical mean which is 25. Thus, the first null hypothesis is accepted since the difference between the tabulated t-value and the computed one is statistically significant. (see table 1)

**Table (1)
Results of the First Aim and First Null Hypothesis**

No. of sample		\bar{x}	SD	df	Computed t-value	Tabulated t-value	Level of significant
1 st	40	13.35	6.91913	39	10-649	2.021	0.05
4 th	40	15.20	6.25607		9-906		

7.1.2 Results related to the second aim and second, third and fourth Null hypotheses

By using the two independent samples t-test formula^{*}, results are arranged as follows:

1. No statistically significant differences are found out between the 1st and 4th stage samples in the totally correct answers since the mean score of the 1st stage is 11.40 and its standard deviation is 7.206, whereas the mean score of the 4th stage is 8.55 and the standard deviation is 5.852. The computed t-value which is 1.942 is found out to be lower than the tabulated t-value which is 1.98 on a level of significance of 0.05 and a degree of freedom of 78. This shows that both stages are of the same level in the totally correct answers. (see table 2)

**Table 2
Results of the second null hypothesis**

No. of sample		\bar{x}	SD	df	Compute d t-value	Tabulate d t-value	Level of significant
1 st	40	11.40	7.206	78	1.942	1.98	0.05
4 th	40	8.55	5.852				

$$T = \frac{\bar{x}_1 - \bar{x}_2}{\frac{\sqrt{S_1^2(n_1-1) + S_2^2(n_2-1)}}{n_1 + n_2 - 2} \left[\frac{1}{n_1} + \frac{1}{n_2} \right]}$$

2. There are statistically significant differences between the 1st and 4th stage samples in the partially correct answers and in favour of the 4th stage sample. The mean score of the 1st stage is 1.950 and its standard deviation is 3.121, whereas the mean score of the 4th stage is 6.650 and its standard deviation is 3.084. The computed t-value is 6.774 which is found out to be higher than the tabulated t-value which is 1.98 on a level of significance of 0.05 and a degree of freedom of 78. This shows that the 4th stage sample level is better than that of the 1st stage sample level in the partially correct answers. (see table 3)

Table 3
Results of the third hypothesis

No. of sample		\bar{x}	SD	df	Computed t-value	Tabulated t-value	Level of significance
1 st	40	1.950	3.121	78	6.774	1.98	0.05
4 th	40	6.650	3.084				

3. No statistically significant differences are found out between 1st and 4th stage samples in the total score of the test since the mean score of the 1st stage is 13.35 and its standard deviation is 6.9191, whereas the mean score of the 4th stage is 15.20 and its standard deviation is 6.2560. The computed t-value which is 1.254 is found out to be lower than the tabulated t-value which is 1.98 on a level of significance of 0.05 and a degree of freedom of 78 (see table 4). This signifies that both the 1st and 4th stage samples are of the same level in the total score of the euphemistic expressions test. It also shows that the level of both samples is very low. This low level is due to several reasons such as ignoring the cultural points in teaching English as a foreign language for Iraqi learners; the courses and textbooks are not culture-based or put no focus on using cultural points; and also the learners put no emphasis on culture and use English as it is used by the British. There should be a kind of attention, care, and emphasis on cultural points in order

to raise the awareness of both instructors and learners of the importance of this branch when teaching English for communication purposes.

Table 4
Results of the fourth hypothesis

No. of sample		\bar{x}	SD	df	Computed t-value	Tabulated t-value	Level of significant
1 st	40	13.35	6.9191	78	1.254	1.98	0.05
4 th	40	15.20	6.2560				

Based on the results stated earlier, the following conclusions are drawn:

1. In general, the level of EFL Iraqi college students in using euphemistic expressions is very low.
2. EFL college students have no awareness of the cultural points of British English. They don't even use any kind of cultural points either in their speech or writing.
3. No care or attention is paid to teaching cultural points in Iraqi curriculum, syllabuses, or courses, especially at college level.
4. No training is acquired by neither the learners nor the instructors in cultural aspects and points of British English.

The following recommendations are put forward:-

1. Special care and attention should be paid to teaching cultural points by course book designers, departments of English, and college instructors.
2. Learners should do their best to raise their level in British cultural points and use real English in speech and writing.
3. Instructors and learners of EFL should be engaged in training courses in using real British English in their daily life.

4. College textbooks and courses should be changed to suit the modern age of communication and interaction.
5. Departments of English at University level should pay attention to listening and design a course in listening comprehension in addition to similar existing ones in reading comprehension, speaking, and writing.

خلاصة البحث

يتطلع الناس في عالمنا وعلى اختلاف مجتمعاته وثقافته الى اتباع اساليب مقبولة ولطيفة للتواصل بينهم. ان مصطلح (التلطف في الكلام) يلعب دورا هاما في التواصل في حياتنا اليومية وكذلك يمثل دورا بارزا في اللغة الانكليزية . وتبرز حقيقة مشكلة(العبارات التلطفية) في ان معظم استعمال هذه العبارات تكون غامضة او غير واضحة وهي تمثل مشكلة في التواصل اليومي بين الناس. وعلى هذا الاساس فان هذا البحث هو محاولة للتمييز بين مستويات الطلبة العراقيين الدارسين للغة الانكليزية (EFL) في قدرة استيعابهم لاستعمال هذه العبارات التلطفية في الجمل الانكليزية بصورة تلقائية طبيعية وواضحة. وكذلك يهدف البحث الى :

1- التمييز بين مستويات طلبة المرحلة الاولى والرابعة في اقسام اللغة الانكليزية في مدى استيعابهم لاستخدام العبارات التلطفية .

2- التوصل الى ايجاد ماذا كان هنالك اختلافات احصائية واضحة بين المراحل الاولى والرابعة للطلبة وحسب معايير قياسية احصائية في استعمال العبارات التلطفية في اللغة الانكليزية.