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Euphemism from a Politeness Perspective: An Exploration of the ability of Iraqi EFL learners to Use and Comprehend Euphemistic Expressions

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Abstract

Euphemisms are advantageous in people's social life by turning sensitive into a more acceptable ones so that resentful feelings and embarrassment can be avoided. This study investigates the ability of Iraqi English learners in using euphemistic expressions, meanwhile, raising their awareness and the faculty members in English teaching faculties regarding the relevance of discussing the topics that demand euphemisation. This study comprised three stages: initial test, explicit instruction with activities, and a final test for the students' development in this domain. A test has been distributed among 50 respondents, who are at the fourth year of their undergraduate study at the University of

Babylon/ College of Basic Education. The low rate of producing and recognising euphemisms in the first stage of the study, it is concluded that Iraqi students that the course design in the foreign context is inadequate. After consistent training during the second stage, students have shown significant development in mastering these expressions.

Keywords: Euphemism, foreign language learning, pragmatics, politeness, interlanguage pragmatics.

1. Introduction

Euphemism is a universal phenomenon referring to the substitution of a word that is considered somehow harsh or probably insulting with a more indirect one. It is suggested that when a disrespectful topic is discussed, it is likely that partners have two motives in describing it euphemistically: minimising the negative impacts on their addressees and hence maintain their addressee's negative face and simultaneously preserving theirs (Allan and Burridge, 1991). Although these two motives are closely related, they are, nonetheless, distinct at the same time. The former stems from the possible discomfort that the hearer might experience and the latter stems from the probable negative consequences of this discomfort. Euphemism constitutes a profound part of every language; however, it is stated that English has exceeded others in its ever-growing number of them. Studies have been carried out that explore euphemism in different culture such as Al-Husseini (2007); Greene (2000); Rabab'ah and Al-Qarni's (2012); Alotabi (2015). Nevertheless, Iraqis usage of euphemisms whether in their daily life communication in their native language or in English as a foreign language has not been granted this

attention. In this concern, this study seeks to examine whether Iraqi learners of English as a foreign language are aware of the strategies of producing and perceiving these expressions. Meanwhile, it raises the awareness in the students for the necessity of learning these strategies and at the same time in the academic staff members at Iraqi universities for the critical demands of incorporating this field into their curriculum.

2. Extra-linguistic and Linguistic Perspectives for Euphemism

Euphemism is traced to the Greek word *euphemous* that means ‘fortunate speech’ (Enright, 1985: p. 32). In its etymological sense, it consists of two roots: eu (meaning well) and pHEME (meaning speak) that ultimately make the word ‘good speaking’ (McArthur and McArthur, 1992: p. 387). It refers to any word or expression used upon people’s desire of finding a more polite or less direct way of talking about what is considered a socially embarrassing topic such as death or bodily function. Rawson (1981: p.1) emphasis that euphemisms are instruments whose importance is represented in influencing people’s social life by turning taboo and sensitive topics such as religion and sex into a more acceptable manner so that resentful feelings can be avoided. In other words, it facilitates the discussion of sensitive topics with the simultaneous preservation of civility. Many euphemisms are coined or created for the sake of offence avoidance or discriminations against those who are either minorities or considered unfortunate for a particular reason. It is said that there are a number of topics in which individuals are reluctant to utter semantically transparent terms. Such topics are mostly related to using bathrooms, sexual relations, and pregnancy. In order to solve this dilemma, linguistic

substitution strategy is the rejoice of speakers as in using ‘restroom’ instead of ‘urinate’ (Carnoy, 1927); (Crystal, 2000); (Partridge, 1947); (Rawson, 1981)

From the outset, and depending on the interest of the scholars, there are different perspectives regarding euphemism, leading to the term being defined in various manners. Such definitions are either derived from an extralinguistic standpoint or from a strictly linguistic perspective. Within linguistic definitions, there is a recent interest in explaining euphemisms from pragmatic perception (Gomez, 2009).

In the conceptual description of this phenomenon, the extralinguistic definition is basically psychological in nature. According to Kany’s (1960: p. V, cited in Gomez 2009: p. 727) opinion, who speaks from a sentimental taboo perception:

A euphemism is the means by which a disagreeable, offensive or fear-instilling matter is designated with an indirect or softer term. Euphemisms satisfy a linguistic need. For his own sake as well as that of his hearers, a speaker constantly resorts to euphemisms in order to disguise an unpleasant truth, veil an offense, or palliate indecency,

This offence in Howard’s (1984: p.101) opinion can be substituted with a softer and periphrastic one, which is described as cleaning up certain aspects in life to make them more pleasant to present. However, this definition, as well as other related ones in this field, do not stem from linguistic resources; rather it is based on the motivations that reveal extralinguistic start. The advantage of this definition is that it supplies the

reader with the perceptions behind using euphemisms, though, it neglects its linguistic nature.

The second perspective regarding this phenomenon is also of numerous origins, some of them are based on lexical-semantic perspective and the more recent one is from a pragmatic standpoint. Among the various traditional definitions that are based on structural lexical semantics, Bruneal (1952: p. 23, cited in Gomez 2009: p. 728) demonstrates that euphemism consists of conscious substitutions of expressions and terms considered forbidden to be uttered publicly with a more indirect one. Thus, euphemism abstracts the functionality of the original signal with a replacement word, described by Moya (1988) as a lexical substitutive, which hides or conceals the features of a more unpleasant one. Cited in Gomez (2009: pp. 728-729). On the other hand, Gomez (2009: p. 729) explains euphemism in a deeper linguistic concept where it is assimilated to synonymy, but it defers diachronically in being more unstable and transitory than synonyms.

In more recent years this phenomenon is defined from a pragmatic point of view with more emphasis on the discursive characterisations. It takes into account the interpretive role of the hearer and the factors (elements) that participate in the process of euphemistic communication. According to Allan and Burridge (1991: p.11) “a euphemism is used in an alternative to a dispreferred expression in order to avoid possible loss of face: either one’s own face or, through giving offence, that of the audience, or of some third party.”

The pragmatic and communicative perspective in studying euphemisms is evident in the treatment of this phenomenon in the more up-to-date dictionary of linguistics after the first considerations from a stylistic and rhetorical perspective. In other words, a pragmatic description of euphemisms combines the three aspects within one definition: firstly, the necessity of involving the social and psychologic facts that stand behind euphemism; secondly, the acknowledgement of the substitution between euphemistic process and lexical units; and thirdly, the intention derived from taboo of the inclusion of this communicative concept stems from the intention of avoiding taboo usage of language (Gomez, 2009: p. 733).

The above standpoint is derived from politeness and face consideration. Face threat is the politeness basis for euphemism that arises from considering the public self-image or face (Clark and Schunk, 1980; Goffman, 1955, 1981). It is taken for granted in Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory that people try to avoid face-threatening acts due to their concern about their addressee's reaction and feeling, as in requests and criticisms. Nevertheless, these face-threatening situations are, on many occasions, unavoidable for which interlocutors seek mitigation to rescue their intrinsic threat (Brown and Levinson, 1987). It is said that such situations can either threaten the autonomy of the speaker and/or that of the hearer (i.e. negative face) as well as their desire to be accepted and highly regarded by others (i.e. positive face). Euphemistic topics are assimilated to face-threatening acts in being inappropriate to be discussed publicly. Interlocutors can threaten the positive face of the two partners in a conversation. The hearer's face is threatened upon experiencing the disrespectful attitude of the speaker due

to mentioning the word ‘urination’, for example. It is considered disregard for the hearer’s sensibilities. On the other hand, the speaker’s face is threatened by casting his public image upon uttering such unpreferred expressions and raising such disrespectful topics. As far as the negative face is concerned, using an indirect reference is considered a strategy for reducing the embarrassment and intensity of these topics. What concerns us in this work is the recent trend of viewing euphemism from a pragmatic standpoint and more specifically in relation to face concern.

Significantly mentioned, euphemism is a universal phenomenon; speakers of different languages resort to substituting an offensive word with a less harsh counterpart. It is be remarked, however, that this phenomenon is subject to cultural diversity such that some expressions are regarded to be taboo in certain cultures, but they are not in others (Allan and Burridge, 1991: p. 12).

There is a significant body of research covering social and cognitive reasons for lexical avoidance of specific terms. More relevantly, the literature is rich with studies that tackle euphemisms in different languages. Enright (1985), for example, explored the utilisation of this phenomenon in different aspects including money, sex, sickness, and death in four languages, bearing in mind the possible cultural differences between the communities tackled in the study, namely: France, Italy, Greece, and the United States. Whilst Enright (1985) used age, gender and education as variables in his study, at the same time Storr (1985) noticed that age can significantly influence the usage of euphemisms in

different generations. Gu (2006), nonetheless, argues that euphemisms are not only related to social, cultural and traditional values, rather, to the context where they occur as well. She posits that participants who have different social class and educational level can estimate the importance of euphemisms and employ their expressions differently. As for euphemism in the Arabic communities, Farghal (1995) studied the utilisation of this phenomenon in Arabic, affirming that these societies are prone to use euphemisms with the assistance of four major methods: antonyms, circumlocution, figurative language and remodelling. These strategies might not be employed by speakers of other languages in different cultures. Thus, culture and society might develop diverse methods to conceal the harshness of an inappropriate expression. Furthermore, Al-Shamali (1997) carried out a more extensive research in the usage of euphemisms with respect to body parts, sickness, death, and mental illness. After concentrating on the Jordanian dialect, she endeavoured that death, mental illness, excretory functions, garbage collector, memorial ceremony, lack of intelligence are mostly euphemised topics in Arabic with the influence of social factors, as age variation. In this respect, Alotaibi (2015) conducted a study that explored the usage of taboo words by Kuwaiti Arabic speakers in their native language with a concentration on age as a social variable.

In reviewing the studies that tackle a contrastive study between Arabic and English

In investigating the difference between Arabic and British English, Both Rabab'ah and Al-Qarni (2012) and Alhussaini (2007) carried out a contrastive study of euphemism. The two studies depicted some

similarities and differences in tackling this phenomenon. Rabab'ah and Al-Qarni's (2012) find that the topics of death, bodily functions, and lying were euphemised in both cultures. Understatement and general for specific were the strategies adopted in concealing the harshness of these topics. They also found that female Saudi native speakers of Arabic and the native speakers of British English have more inclination than male speakers to avoid the use of taboo terms in the three aforementioned topics. This finding seems to concur with that of Greene (2000), who concludes that utterances produced by female speakers are judged to be more polite. Moreover, Rabab'ah and Al-Qarni's (2012) study demonstrate that religious beliefs, values and customs impact the use of polite behaviour and language use in the two respected languages. More specifically, topics related to death are mostly religion-based. For example, 'was taken to Jesus' and 'he met his maker' encounter 'ðahaba ila rafeyqihi ?l ??la – He left to his supreme companion, i.e., GOD'', and '?d'ama allahu ?jraka – May God glorify your reward', manifest how British English and Saudi Arabic reflect religious beliefs and values.

Despite these similarities, euphemism is culture-specific. The two cultures might show different attitudes regarding the same topic. Such differences can also be seen in the findings of Rabab'ah and Al-Qarni's (2012) study. They argue that euphemism in the two languages is influenced by the different beliefs, customs, lifestyles, and behaviours of the two cultures. Their study reveals that the topic variation, i.e. death, lying or bodily functions, alongside the degree of formality and gender can affect the choice of strategies. For example, they have demonstrated that in the formal situations, the topics of death and bodily functions are

euphemized by the Saudi participants through ‘part-for-whole’, and ‘deletion’, respectively. In contrast, the British participants resorted to ‘synonym’ and ‘general-for-specific’ strategies for the same topics. Greene (2000) has arrived at similar findings that forms of euphemisms Russian and English speakers adhere to vary due to social and cultural differences.

On the other hand, Al-Husseini (2007) has carried out a contrastive study that discusses the nature of euphemism in both Iraqi Arabic and English: its definition, classification, nature and relationship with certain figures of speech. According to this research, Al-Husseini has concluded that there are points of similarities and points of differences between the two languages. As to the similarities, he found that euphemism fulfils the same goal in the two languages. i.e. to avoid fearful, offensive, and unpleasant subjects via the use of a less harsh language. Nonetheless, such replacement of offensive expressions is not the same in the two cultures as some words are regarded to be offensive or taboo in English but not in Arabic and vice versa. Such variation relies on the value system accented in a certain culture but not in the other. For example, in the Arabic society, words or names associated with marriage and/or woman are regarded unacceptable to be used outside the formal or religious ceremonies; nevertheless, they can be used freely in the English society. The second similarity between Arabic and English is that euphemism has a close relationship with indirect speech acts since it is recruited to show a gentler form than that of direct speech. As to the variation between the two languages, Al-Husseini (2007: p. 343) has found that the most significant difference is that “euphemism in Arabic is

more comprehensive since it includes different aspects other than what is mentioned in English". He indicates that euphemism performs different functions in Arabic society such as beautifying and emphasizing speech; it is utilized in order to explain things better or seek the attention of the listeners or hearers. It can also be used to exaggerate things or subjects by making them seem larger, better, or worse than they really are. On the other hand, euphemism in English is used only to substitute a word which has offensive connotations with a more acceptable one. The second difference between the two languages is represented in the strategies of performing this task. In Arabic, euphemism can be performed using innuendos, waves, symbols, and hints. He finally adds that '[m]ost of these types are somewhat situational since they can be interpreted only according to certain contexts.' (p. 343)

Despite the effort in highlighting the similarities and differences between the two languages, Al-Huseini (2007) has not tackled the topics of euphemism in the Iraqi dialect in contrast to these in British English.

3. Euphemism in English

In this section, the widely euphemised topics in English are tackled. Though they are classified by Ayto (2007) into thirteen categories, the ones involved in this work are as follows:

Body and its part: A fat lady or girl are often avoided to be named so; instead the notion of 'weight' usually substitutes that of 'fat' by saying, for example 'I intend to lose some weight', rather than 'I am trying to lose some fat'. In addition, 'overweight' and 'obese' mostly substitute

that of 'too fat'. Beside fatness, baldness and ugliness are also included within this category. A bald person is mostly referred to as 'thinning' to suggest a diminution in the amount of hair. 'Receding', 'high forehead', and 'wide parting' are all expressions to be used for an advanced hair loser. As to ugliness, 'less attractive', 'plain', and 'homely' are all alternatives to the frankness of 'ugly'.

Bodily function and secretion: Within this section is defecation and urination. A famous strategy of concealing the process of eliminating the waste product of eating is by acknowledging that this process is natural and unavoidable by saying, for example, 'call of nature' and 'demand of nature'. There is also a possibility of saying, 'using the restroom', 'relieve myself', and 'go to the lavatory'. Another subcategory is sweating, which individuals altered by 'perspire' since the 18th century. Vomiting is one of the commonest terms avoided in British English. By saying 'be sick' and 'throw up', a person can mitigate its force. Within this same category are farts and belches. People in western society tend to soften 'belch' by 'burp'. Foods and drinks that are likely to cause belch can be politely referred to as 'windy' or 'gassy'. Similarly, the escape of gas from the confines of the body is gently described as 'breaking winds'. 'Backfires' (from backfiring a car) and 'blow off' are also expressions to avoid the word 'fart'.

Fading out: age and death: It is commonly known that death is a great taboo word in the western society wherein people try to conceive its harshness with expressions like 'lives in the bosom of the lord', 'alive with Jesus', 'laid to rest', 'pass away', 'kick the bucket' ... etc. In

addition, age is, perhaps, the most notorious euphemism in the English language as it is associated with the time of life and existence. ‘Senior citizen’ disguised ‘old person’ during the 1930s. Another subtle gradation that helps in avoiding the directness and frankness of the word ‘old’ is ‘elderly’ which has become a softer synonymy. ‘Golden ages’, on the other hand, portrays the old age as the best period of life, years of ripeness, and fulfilment. ‘Silver surfers’ can also be used as softener of this period of life.

Illness and injury: Within this category, physical disabilities, such as blindness is substitutes with ‘visual deficient’ or ‘sight deprived’. Deafness is euphemised with ‘hearing impaired’ and ‘aurally challenged’. Those who suffer from paralysis are described as ‘disabled’, or ‘handicapped’. In addition, mental illness, such as madness is referred to as ‘mentally handicapped’, ‘nervous breakdown’ and ‘mental breakdown’. ‘Learning and development difficulty’ and ‘slower minded’, and ‘special need’ are expressions used to conceal the harshness of describing individuals whose mental powers are abnormally low.

Poverty: The shame of poverty always demands individuals to euphemise it, as neither people nor nations have the desire of admitting poverty. Thus, alternative strategies need to be sought to avoid using the word ‘poor’. The most widely used expressions during the 20th century are ‘low income’ and ‘low paid’. Payments given to low-income individuals are usually termed ‘incomer support’, ‘financial support or ‘financial assistance’ because charity is a dirty word, which needs to be mitigated with a politer expression.

Crime: Within this category, prison is an embarrassing word not only for those who are sentenced for a crime but also for those who are in charge of the prison system. Hence, the word ‘correction’ is a central euphemistic to prisons like saying ‘place of correction’, ‘house of correction’, ‘correction facility’, or ‘correction institution’.

Work: it includes a number of aspects that need to be euphemised, among which are money, bribery, unemployment and bankruptcy. When items are in reduced prices, instead of referring to them as ‘cheap’, which mostly carries a connotation of low quality, an alternative is sought as in ‘bargain’ or ‘affordable’. Moreover, unemployment is a significantly mentioned expression which was of relevance in Britain during the 1980s and 1990s when unemployment decade hit the country. ‘Unwaged’ as well as ‘jobseekers’ substitute the over frankness of unemployed.

In this respect, it can be implicated that the euphemism of the topics presented in this section are also asserted in the Arabic language in general and the Iraqi dialect in particular (Al-Husseini, 2007). Nevertheless, it is questionable if Iraqi English learners are aware of the substitutive expressions that can be recruited to save both their and their addressee’s face. This question entails the capacity of the educational curriculum in the foreign language context in enhancing the ability of language learners in this domain.

4. Previous Research on Pragmatic Competence and Teaching Euphemism

Despite the globalisation of English as an international language, being the lingua franca when speakers of different language communication between each other, there are, nevertheless, substantial hidden tendencies which cannot be revealed but after exposure to the community in question. The difficulty that encounters non-native speakers is represented not only in making sense of a euphemistic expression but also in learning which expression fits in a specific situation. The ability to use language in accordance with the demand of the contextual situation is named pragmatic competence. The pragmatic competence lies within the boundary of interlanguage pragmatics. It is a vital aspect of intercultural communication due to the significant effect it has on NNSs' communicative competence. Pragmatic competence in L2 research is usually defined as "the ability to produce and comprehend utterances that is adequate to the L2 socio-cultural context in which interaction takes place" (Kasper & Rose, 2001b, p. 1). More specifically, Barron (2003), cited in Kecskes, (2014, p. 64), who has researched the interlanguage competence of L2 learners, asserts:

[P]ragmatic competence [...] is understood as the knowledge of the linguistic resources available in a given language for realising particular illocutions, knowledge of the sequential aspects of speech acts, and finally, knowledge of the appropriate contextual use of the particular language's linguistic resources.

To be pragmatically competent, a speaker needs to master a number of interrelated abilities. Jung (2002) summarises these abilities in five major

points, asserting that they are subject to overlap to the point that they would not operate independently:

- i. The ability to perform speech acts.
- ii. The ability to produce and interpret non-literal meaning.
- iii. The ability to perform politeness functions.
- iv. The ability to perform discourse function.
- v. The ability to use cultural knowledge.

In order to account for the ways of developing pragmatic competence in NNSs, researchers should take into account the socio-cognitive orientations of language use (Kasper, 2001a). Kasper (1992) notes that there are three processes in the development of pragmatic competence: first, pragmatic transfer in which the pragmatic knowledge of L1 influences the production and comprehension of L2 pragmatic performance by transferring pragmatic strategies from the native language into the target language. Hence, they might respond inappropriately to their native interlocutors. This transfer stems from the lack of the aforementioned culture-specific pragmatic knowledge. Second, fossilisation: the studied cases of fossilisation in routine formulas show that students oversimplify the structure and overgeneralise the functions of the routines in question. Third, acquisitional order: studies claim that the acquisition of form-function of L2 precedes the acquisition of the sociocultural rules of that language.

During the recent years, growing attention has been directed towards the usage of euphemisms in different languages, yet speakers of different

cultural background and languages might encounter significant obstacles in learning this strategy and in reviving the suitable word to be used; even when they learn them in the target language. This is why Rabab'ah and Al-Qarni (2012) assert that upon the intention of communicating with native speakers of the target language, non-native speakers might sometimes struggle in euphemistically conveying a particular tabooed term. Hence, embarrassing situations can emerge which, in turn, can threaten the two interlocutors' face. They also emphasise that instances of euphemism in EFL textbooks, taught in Arabic universities, are only small or insufficient quantities or amounts, which mandate syllabus designers to integrate this significant pragmatic component. Such integration would help in raising the awareness of the foreign/second language learners of the similarities and differences of euphemism usage in the cultures in question. They add that contrasting these expressions would help the learners in perceiving the two cultures and to use them appropriately in intercultural communication.

Similarly, after carrying out his contrastive study of English and Chinese euphemisms, Qi (2010: p. 141) concludes that studying euphemism in a foreign language, English in that work, is "of great importance and practical value in successful intercultural communication", stating that euphemism is a linguistic and, to some extent, cultural phenomenon. He asserts that it develops throughout various socio-psychological factors. Therefore, foreign language teachers need to draw the students' attention to the necessity of understanding euphemistic expressions due to their association with cultural connotations. Such understanding can be achieved via a bilingual comparison and contrast of such words and

expressions between the two languages with a focus on those that differ in the two cultures. As for some sensitive words and expressions, teachers might recommend consulting a relevant dictionary. A second method of raising the students' awareness can be achieved by explicitly highlighting the tabooed subjects in daily English communication in order that students would avoid recruiting some expressions that might offend their English addressee.

Based on the aforementioned literature in the field of euphemism, and to the best of our knowledge, we can realise that no attention has been given yet to the usage of euphemisms neither in the Iraqi dialect of Arabic, in comparison with English, taking into account the possible variations between the two cultures and languages, nor to the proficiency of Iraqi learners of English as a foreign language. Such variations might affect the evaluation, recognition, and employment of this phenomenon. Hence, this study will fill this gap in the literature. It is posited here that the aim of this study is not only to investigate this ability of students in the foreign language they are learning but also raising the awareness of both the academic staff members in those faculties and Iraqi students about the urgent necessity of teaching and learning the various topics that demand euphemism and the words that replace the inappropriate ones. From the above discussion, the following research questions are raised:

1. To what extent are Iraqi undergraduate students capable of perceiving the meaning of euphemistic expressions?
2. Will they be able to replace a publicly unpreferable expression with a softer acceptable one?

3. When euphemisms are explicitly taught, will students manifest a remarkable development when another test is implemented?

Answering these questions can entail whether foreign language teaching in Iraq provided students with sufficient information in this domain and if it is necessary to shed light on this area. In order to answer these questions, the following hypotheses are established:

1. Iraqi undergraduate students have not yet developed their ability to recognise and utilising the suitable euphemistic expressions with respect to the topics that might cause discomfort.
2. The foreign language teaching environment is inadequate in acquiring and adopting euphemisms unless students are exposed to the culture in question by immersing themselves within its native community.
3. There will be a significant development in the usage of these expressions when an adequate emphasis is given, and exercises are done.

4. Method

This study is a longitudinal one. It passes through three stages: firstly, a test will be distributed among the students to evaluate their knowledge in the recognition and usage of euphemistic expressions; secondly, an explicit instruction has been provided for the usage of euphemisms and thirdly, another test has been distributed in the form of comic cartoons to provide a full context for the expressions requested to be substituted.

5.1 The first stage of the study

Mackey and Gass (2005: 125) remark that the type of research can play a role in the number of respondents in a way that one hundred respondents is enough in descriptive studies. Correlated studies might require fifty respondents, whilst fifteen to thirty is sufficient for experimental studies. Because the current research is experimental in nature, 54 students provided us with data to elicit conclusion with respect to the students' proficiency in this field. The respondents are at the final stage of their undergraduate study at the department of English/ college of basic education/ university of Babylon. This makes the range of their age 21 years old. It should be remarked here that the proficiency level of students ranges from intermedia to advanced intermediate.

As to the methodology of the study, it is thought that the meaning of euphemistic expressions can be interpreted in isolation from the context of the situation. The context is not mandatory in depicting the substitutive term. Instead, a test can be carried out in investigating the students' ability in this domain. Grenesee and Upshur (1996: 14) suggest that a test is a task or a form of measurement that elicits certain information from the test taker. The test, as Bussmann (1998: 654) assures, is a measurement of linguistic achievement in accordance with different levels of proficiency through more or less standardized procedures. these procedures will be sufficient for the usual quantitative criteria of the test, above all, objectivity, validity and reliability. likewise, for Mousavi (1999: 349) a test is a measurement instrument, designed to elicit a specific sample of individuals' behaviour.

Accordingly, a diagnostic test is constructed to examine the students' ability in recognizing and producing euphemistic expressions. The test encompasses two questions: the first of which measures the students' responses at the recognition level. It includes ten items wherein the students are required to choose the best euphemistic expressions to put in the blanks. The second question is constructed to measure the students' responses at the production level wherein they are asked to give euphemistic expressions for certain suggested words (see appendix 1).

error analysis, on the other hand, is a significant approach that tackles the errors produced by the second language learners and the techniques of classifying these errors (Johnson and Johnson, 1988: 110). Brown (2000: 223) ascribes errors into four reasons: the context of learning, interlingual transfer, intralingual transfer, and communication strategies.

1. ***Context of learning***: this type of errors may stem from the influence of some factors, such as the classroom, teacher, curriculum. It is plausible that learner constitute hypotheses about the second language, which might turn to be faulty (Brown, 2000: 226).
2. ***Interlingual interference***: some errors can be attributed to the negative influence of the rules, principles and regulations of the learners' first language, i.e. Arabic in this context, on the acquisition of these rules and regulation of the target language, i.e. English, (Lado, 1961: 211).
3. ***Intralingual transfer***: some errors can be due to the negative transfer that may result from firstly **overgeneralization**, which is

the misuse of grammatical rules; secondly, **under generalization**, referring to the incomplete application of rules; and thirdly **ignorance rules application**, i.e. the wrong application of rules (Brown, 1989: 82-3).

4. **Communication strategies**: this type of errors refers to the communicative strategies that learners recruit in overcoming the gap in their knowledge. Among these strategies is **avoidance** and **guessing** (Littlewood, 1998: 83). It is worth mentioning that most of the errors at the recognition level reflect signs of guessing (see Question1, appendix1). Avoidance strategy is followed for the items which the students left without giving any response.

With regard to the validity and reliability of the test, it is traditionally approved that the qualities of a good test are measured by its validity and reliability. The notion of validity, as Heaton (1988:159) states, refers to the extent to which a test measures what it has planned to do. Validity, for him, involves two criteria: content validity and face validity. The former involves testing the skills that the tester wishes to measure while the latter is insured by exposing the test to a jury so as to assess its validity. As to reliability, it questions whether a test provides consistently accurate scores in order to be valid (Harris, 1969:19). To estimate the reliability of the present study, Kurder- Richardson's method is adopted with formula given below:

$R = N / N-1 (m (N-m) / NX^2)$, taking into account that **R** stands for reliability, **N** is the number of items in the test, **m** is means of the test scores, and **X** is the standard deviation of the test.

Results

This section is dedicated to the discussion of the results of the test, which give an impression of the students' proficiency. These results either verify or refute the hypotheses mentioned earlier. Before presenting our results, we should note that these responses were graded according to the meaning of euphemised expressions provided in euphemism dictionary as well as by English language tutors at the University of Salford.

Students' Performance of Question 1

Testing the students' performance at the recognition level, the following table illustrates the results obtained on each item in question1:

Table (1) Items Distribution of Question 1

No.	Percentage of correct items	Percentage of incorrect items	Percentage of avoided Items
1	14	86	0
2	30	70	0
3	12	88	0
4	30	70	12
5	28	62	8
6	44	56	4
7	62	38	2
8	34	46	4
9	22	78	2
10	28	72	2
<i>Total</i>	31.4	66.6	3.4

The above table shows that the total number and the percentage of correct items are 157, with 31.4%, whereas the total number of incorrect items (including the avoided items) was 333, with 70%. The highest rate of the

students' incorrect responses is an indication of their incompetence in recognizing euphemistic expressions. Regarding the part of that tests the recognition of euphemistic expressions, it is clear that item 7, related to the status of refugees, is of 62%, indicating that it was the easiest item. This rate reflects the students' familiarity with this item. On the other side, the most difficult item was 3, related to death, which is 88%. Despite the similarity between the two languages in the taboo of death, this result indicates that the students are unaware of the expressions used in concealing its force in English.

Students' Performance Question 2

Assessing the students' acquisition at the production level, the students' responses on each item in question 2 are listed in the following table:

Table (2) Items Distribution in Question 2

No.	Percentage of correct items	Percentage of incorrect items	Percentage of avoided Items
1	52	48	28
2	60	40	6
3	2	98	46
4	44	56	2
5	52	48	2
6	12	88	28
7	14	86	18
8	46	54	---
9	20	80	2
10	54	46	8
Total	35.6%	64.4%	14%

This table illustrates that the total number of the correct items was 178, with 35.6%, whereas the total number of the incorrect items, including the avoided items, was 322, with 78.4%. Since the total number of their incorrect responses is higher than that of their correct ones, this result proves that the students are incompetent in producing the euphemistic expressions. Concerning the production part, it seems that the easiest item was 10, related to lack of employment, whose rate was 54%. This percentage reveals the students' exposure to this item. On the other hand, in relation to body function, item 3 was the most difficult one, with 98%, which totally asserts the students' incapability in this regard.

Students' Total Performance of the Whole Test

The results of the whole test are displayed in the table below, which contains both the recognition and production levels.

Table (3) the Total Performance in Questions 1 and 2

Level	Percentage of correct items	Percentage of incorrect items	Percentage of avoided Items
Recognition	31.4	66.6	3.4
Production	35.6	64.4	14
Total	33.5	65.5	17.8

It is noticeable from these results that the total number of incorrect responses at the recognition part (including the avoided ones) was 66.6%, whereas the total number of incorrect items at the production level (including the avoided ones) was 64.4%. It depicts that most of the Iraqi

EFL students encounter difficulties in mastering euphemistic expressions on both production and recognition levels. This result supports the first hypothesis of this study. On the production level, the students' weak performance is manifested since the total number of their correct responses was 35.6%, which is significantly less than their correct ones, i.e. 64.24%. Hence, the second hypothesis is verified too.

5.2 The second stage of the study

In the second stage of this study, efforts have been paid in teaching euphemisms explicitly. The aforementioned categories in section 3 have been explained for students: the reason behind euphemising them, their counterpart in the native language, i.e. Arabic, their meaning and the variant expressions adopted in such situations. Examples have been given and later the students were asked to do exercises in the form of group discussion and competition so as the information can be maintained in their mind (see appendix 2).

5.3 The third stage of the study

In this stage, another test has been distributed among the students to make sure that they mastered this topic. The second test was in the form of comic cartoons that either involves a conversation between the characters, a subtitle, or just a picture whose indication can be easily understood. Similar to the first distributed test, the respondents were asked either to substitute an expression with a softer one or to state the real direct meaning of a euphemised expression in the cartoon. The total number of pictures was 14. They are all related to the categories discussed so far. The emphasis was on the areas, which, as indicated by

the students during the instruction phase of the study, are not dealt with a lot in a euphemistic manner in their native language. Thus, as can be seen in Appendix 3 the pictures are associated with body parts, body function, age, poverty, death, illness, crime, and work. This test has been distributed amongst the same group of students with the return of 94.4% of the distributed test. In this way, the total number of respondents was 51.

The following two tables manifest the percentage of the correct and wrong answers related to both the production and recognition of euphemistic expressions.

Table (4) Percentage of correct and incorrect production of euphemistic expressions

Item	Number of correct answers	Percentage of correct answers	Number of incorrect answers	Percentage of incorrect answers
Work termination	38	74.50	13	25.49
Body: plain	49	96.01	2	3.92
Poverty: low income	41	80.39	10	19.60
Crime: prison	35	68.62	16	31.37
Work: second hand	42	82.35	9	17.64
Work: class	46	90.19	5	9.80
Hearing impairment	38	74.50	13	25.49
Body odour	37	72.54	14	27.49
Body part: obesity	48	94.11	3	5.88
Telling the truth	44	86.27	7	13.72
Total	418		92	

As can be demonstrated from the table above, there is a significant increase in the number of correctly produced expressions. The highest percentage was 96.01 related work and body part in describing a person who is not beautiful. This can be attributed to the strong association with the daily usage of such expression. The least correctly used was in knowing a substituting name for the prison as a correction facility, with 68.62. It implies that this situation might not be euphemised in Arabic or if it is euphemised it might not be commonly used.

Table (5) Percentage of correct and incorrect recognition of euphemistic expressions

Item	Number of correct answers	Percentage of correct answers	Number of incorrect answers	Percentage of incorrect answers
Work: jobseekers	45	88.32	6	11.76
Work: domestic	39	76.47	12	23.52
Age	40	78.43	11	21.56
Death: undertaker	44	86.27	7	13.72
Crime: stolen	29	56.86	22	43.13
Total	197		58	

In this recognition part of the test, it is found that the highest percentage goes to the work (job seekers), with 88.32. This result might indicate a strong association with the situation in the home leading to mastering it by the students. On the contrary, the least percentage was in recognising the meaning of ‘fell off the back of a truck’ with only 56.86. It might be deduced that because there is not a strong association between the literal meaning of the expression and the situation in which it is used, the students found it difficult to interpret the intended meaning.

5. Conclusion

This study has arrived at the following:

1. Many of the Iraqi EFL at their fourth-year of study encounter difficulties in producing and recognizing and euphemistic expressions. This is obvious from the low rate of their correct responses, 33.5%, less than their incorrect ones, 65.5%. this inability at both levels supports the first hypothesis of the current work.
2. in Question 2, the production level, the high difference between the rates correct responses, 35.6 %, and the incorrect ones, 64.4 %, agrees with the second hypothesis, suggesting that Iraqi EFL students may fail in producing the various forms of euphemism.
3. The plausible causes of the students' poor performance at both levels are attributed to the following error sources:
 - i. Interlingual interference in which EFL use the rules of their native language in the production of euphemism.
 - ii. Intralingual transfer wherein students depend on their earlier knowledge of the second language in recognizing and producing euphemisms through overgeneralization, incomplete application of rules, and ignorance of rules restrictions.
 - iii. Context of learning referring to the deficiency of course design or the way by which the topic is taught.
 - iv. Communicative strategies indicating that students resort to avoidance and guessing in bridging the gap between their knowledge and the linguistic forms of the target language.

4. The secondary results indicate that with explicit instruction and emphasis on the usage and relevance of learning euphemistic expressions, there is a noticeable increase in the percentage of correctly produced and recognised ones.

From the above discussion, this study can pave the way for, first, developing the teaching methods in the Iraqi foreign context. Secondly, it can lead to the second phase of a study that involves a contrastive approach of euphemism in the two cultures, i.e. the Iraqi and the British. Finally, there is a possibility of developing this research into studying euphemism in intercultural communication. Thus, this article is associated with the pedagogical and the sociological sides of language.

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الكناية من منظور التأدب: استكشاف مهارة متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية في استخدام وفهم العبارات الملطفة

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خلاصة البحث

الكلمات الملطفة مفيدة في الحياة الاجتماعية للناس من خلال تغيير الكلمات والمواقف المخجلة وجعلها أكثر قبولاً بحيث يمكن تجنب مشاعر الاستياء والإحراج. تبحث هذه الدراسة في قدرة متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية العراقيين على استخدام هذه التعبيرات ، وفي الوقت نفسه رفع مستوى وعيهم وأعضاء هيئة التدريس في كليات تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية فيما يتعلق بأهمية مناقشة المواضيع التي تتطلب الإلمام بها. تضمنت هذه الدراسة ثلاث مراحل: الاختبار الأولي ، والتعليم الصريح مع الأنشطة ، والاختبار النهائي. تم توزيع اختبار على 50 طالب في السنة الرابعة في جامعة بابل / كلية التربية الأساسية. القصور في التعرف على واستخدام التعبيرات اللغوية في المرحلة الأولى من الدراسة ، يبين ضرورة إيلاء أهمية لتدريس هذه العبارات. بعد التدريب المستمر أظهر الطلاب تطوراً ملحوظاً في إتقان هذه التعبيرات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تعبير ملطف ، تعلم لغة أجنبية ، التداولية ، التادب ، التداولية البيئية

Appendix 1

Q1: Choose the best euphemistic expression in the blanks:

1. Would you like to use -----?
a- toilet b- lavatory c- facilities
2. It cannot be denied that health risk is associated with -----.
a- overweight b- fat c- obesity
3. But it would be a sad thing that he ----- before fulfilling his dream of going to Alaska.
a- die b- kick the bucket c- leave this life
4. I usually avoid fizzy drinks in front of guests in order not to -----
.
a- burp b- belch c- eructate
5. Out of Islamic recommendation, we have to help people who are -
-----.
a- differently-abled b- handicapped c- disable
6. The government should seek a method to support people who are of.....
a- poverty b- poor c- low income
7. British citizens are demonstrating against the increasing number of ----- in their country.
a- refugees b- asylum seekers c- political migrants
8. It is difficult to employ a person who spent many years in -----.
a- jail b- prison c- correction
institution
9. He flushed and bathed in -----, though the room was not hot.
a- perspiration b- swear c- water
10. The handbag that I recently bought and everybody admired was a real -----
a- cheap b- bargain c- not expensive

Q2: Give a euphemistic expression for the following words :

1- Mental illness :

2- Dumb :

3- Farts :

4- Blind :

5- Old in age :

6- Second class :

7- Vomit :

8- Kill :

9- Ugly :

10-

Unemployed :

Appendix 2

A: Choose the best expression from to fill the blanks below

1. Kerry is sad because his father _____ at a young age.
 passed through didn't get it passed
away deathbed passed gas
2. Pat got a great deal on his computer. It only cost him half of the normal price! He probably got it _____.
 from a good friend from falling off a truck behind the
store off the back of the truck
3. The polite way to say "physically disabled" or "handicapped" is _____.
 physically challenged challenging physics in a
wheelchair crippled
4. Have you seen Keanu Reeves lately? He really _____. He used to be in great shape.
 didn't make it passed away fell off the truck let himself go
5. Linda's husband is _____, so he stays at home during the day.
 previously enjoyed passed away between jobs in the little
boys' room
6. Allen bought a _____ car for a reduced price, but it looks brand new.
 previously enjoyed full-figured fallen off the back of a
truck laid off
7. Jen looks so happy. Did you know she's got a _____?
 ladies room bun in the oven full figure passing
way dog in the bum

8. Mary is in the _____. She'll be back in a few minutes. I'll ask her to call you.
- back of the truck oven little boys' room ladies' room
9. These days, magazines are showing pictures of _____ people as well as thin people, to reflect reality.
- previously enjoyed physical laid off full-figured
10. Niharika was in a car accident last week. Unfortunately, she _____.
- passed it didn't make it got laid off let himself go

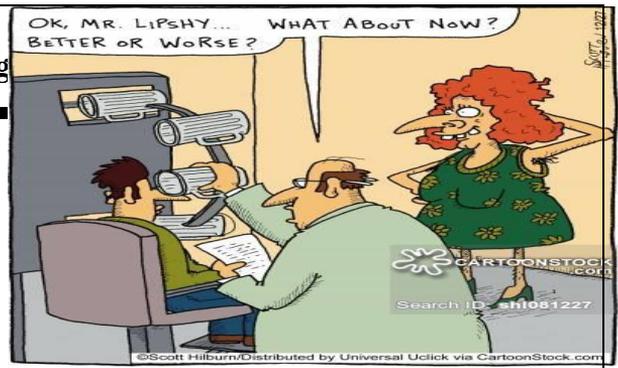
B: Replace the italicised euphemism with more direct language.

1. Because of budget cuts at the company, my mother's job was **terminated**.
2. to her great embodiment, Eileen's mother called her **pleasingly plump**.
3. Mia's **pre-owned vehicle** was the newest business in town and was it was extremely successful.
4. every Tuesday night we put out our recycling bins for the **waste management and disposal techniques** to pick up on Wednesday morning.
5. Mary was **expecting** again, which pleased her son and her parents enormously.
6. according to his lawyers, the accused robber's statement in the court was not **completely true**
7. the council has agreed to build a new mosque to reinforce its commitment to a policy of **diversity**.

Appendix 3

Explain the meaning of the following, which are either euphemised or said directly:

1. Journal of the College of Language



2.



3.



4.



Matthews
"Oh, just sitting around doing five to ten for armed robbery. And you?"

5.



"Hey, I've just found some more stuff we can sell."

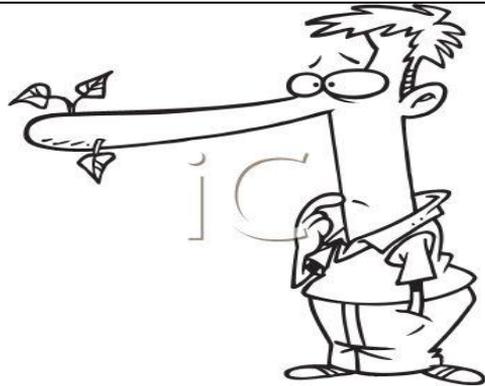
<p>6.</p>	 <p>GERARD WHIZMAN Search ID: gwhm342</p> <p>"Hello, is that the employment agency? It's about the domestic you sent me."</p>
<p>7.</p>	 <p>Does THIS OUTFIT MAKE ME LOOK FAT?</p> <p>©Glenn and Gary McCoy/Distributed by Universal Uclick via CartoonStock.com Search ID: ggm070910</p>
<p>8.</p>	 <p>Foss W. Search ID: rw10013</p> <p>"I can't believe they put us in Dog class"</p>

<p>9.</p>	 <p>"I said 'It's slopping out time'!!!"</p>
<p>10.</p>	 <p>"I prefer 'Baby Boomer' rather than 'Senior Citizen'."</p>
<p>11.</p>	 <p>"I prefer 'Baby Boomer' rather than 'Senior Citizen'."</p>

12.



13.



14.



"So your sticking to that story - This lovely, brand new motor fell of the back of a car-transporter?"