

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Revisit euphemisms from the perspective of intentionality

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Abstract: This paper studies the role of intentionality in the process of generating euphemisms. Intentionality, as the key to human consciousness activities, is not only the starting point of the language user's consciousness activity related to euphemism generation, but also functions through the whole generating process. Its functions can be specified as triggering, orientation, and selection. Collective intentionality restricts individual intentionality and has the function of identifying and integrating individual intentionality. Under the effect of collective intentionality and social environment, the euphemisms are renewed with the time and bear features unique to a particular group.

Keywords: euphemisms intentionality; collective intentionality

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1. Introduction

Euphemisms are a common linguistic phenomenon which pervades in every part of people's life. As the "lubricant" for verbal communication, euphemisms provide enormous cases for scholars to study what has been (and is) going on in our language, our minds and our culture. The existing research on euphemisms have been done from the perspectives of rhetoric, general linguistics, pragmatics, sociology, cross-cultural comparison, etc., and the findings well explain the formal features of euphemisms and the rules and external factors of its use.

Cognitive linguistics provides a new approach to the study of euphemisms by analyzing and interpreting the cognitive mechanism of euphemisms. The relevant studies mainly apply Lakoff & Johnson's Mapping Theory and Focaunnier's Blending Theory to explain that the cognitive basis of euphemisms is the similarity/contiguity association between the source and target domains in people's conceptual systems. Then they further propose the metaphorical mechanism, metonymy mechanism and metaphor/metonymy mechanism of euphemisms (Chen, 2006; Shao and Fan, 2004; Lu and Kong, 2006). However, the cognitive-mind mechanism of euphemism generation calls for more research efforts, that is to say, what kind of mental activity being processed in the brain of the

language user needs to be studied in detail.

This paper attempts to study euphemisms from the perspective of philosophy of mind. The focus lies on the role of intentionality in the process of euphemism generation, including individual intentionality and collective intentionality. The philosophy of mind has carried out in-depth research on intentionality, revealing its intentional and intellectual attributes from many aspects, and thus providing a good foundation for examining the role and characteristics of intentionality in language use.

2. General description of intentionality

The concept of “intentionality” comes from scholastic philosophy. In the nineteenth century, German philosopher and psychologist Franz Brentano introduced it to contemporary philosophy and defined it as one of the characteristics of “mental phenomenon”, thus distinguishing it from “physical phenomenon”. For Brentano, every mental phenomenon involves the “intentional inexistence” of an object toward which the mental phenomenon is directed (Brentano, 1973). After Brentano, Husserl further developed the theory of intentionality, arguing that intentionality is the directionality of consciousness to an object. He analyzed intentionality in terms of three central ideas: intentional act, intentional object and intentional content. The intentional act cannot be distinguished from its object, which is the topic, thing or state of affairs that the act is about. The intentional content of an intentional event is the way in which the subject thinks about or presents to her/himself the intentional object. (Husserl, translated by Ni, 1998: 436)

The American philosopher John Searle also systematically studied and explained intentionality. In his view, intentionality is the generality of the mind that can be directed, about, or related in various forms, to objects and events in the world. (Searle, translated by Li, 2007: 83) The human mind is thus based on the intentional aboutness, linked to the world through human cognition and practical activities. “It connects us to the real world through intentionality” (ibid. 98). It is easy to see that directionality is the most important feature of intentionality. The human mind uses the aboutness of intentionality as the starting point for construe, and people’s cognition and practical activities are thus connected to the outside world in a targeting manner. In another word, the human mind can be about an object and on the object express some kind of intention, or beliefs, hopes, wishes, likes, hates, praises, etc., so as to better carry out the activities targeting at the object, getting the personal act and the society linked.

Intentionality generally has three characteristics: aboutness, directionality, and parasitism. Regarding the use of language, the starting point of meaning initiates with the intentionality of the mind. That is to say, the language user can only develop the object-directed activities on language through the intentional function of the mind. Directionality means the selectivity of intentionality in linguistic representation. When the language user is trying to construe meanings, he/she always chooses something that is meaningful to him/herself, making it the focus of attention and also salience, and representing the salient point in certain linguistic forms or expressions. E.g. *a) My father spends most of the morning on the bus. b) Dad wasted most of the morning on the bus.* The two sentences describe the same event, but the behavioral states expressed are different and the speaker’s attitudes toward the event are apparently different. The differences result from the directionality of the speaker’s intentionality. Parasitism means to “parasitize” the intentionality of

the language user to linguistic symbols, that is, to parasitize the language user's own psychological state or feelings into the language. When the representation of various mental states embodying intentionality is realized in the form of language, the linguistic representation of intentionality is fulfilled.

Searle also introduces collective intentionality to explore the role of intentionality in human social groups. He distinguishes between "We-intentionality" and "I-intentionality". There are intentional forms such as "I intend", "I hope", "I believe", etc. and also intentional forms such as "we intend", "we hope", "we believe", etc. The latter is the embodiment of collective intentionality. Individual intentionality derives from collective intentionality. Collective intentionality is the foundation of all social activities, which builds up the basis for people in a group to cooperate and to share ideas and emotions. (Searle, translated by Li, 2007: 117) For example, a basketball game, a rally, a performance, a class in a school, etc. can all reflect the role of collective intentionality. It is via collective intentionality that human consciousness, mind, language and society are inter-related and inter-connected. The process of language use exemplifies the cooperative process based on collective intentionality. The acquisition of language and language communication are, to some extent, the result of collective interaction.

3. Intentionality and euphemisms

"Substitution" is the core feature of euphemistic expressions. The so-called "substitution" means that in a certain context blunt expressions which are usually coarse, painful or offensive words can be replaced by euphemistic expressions which are naturally mild, agreeable or roundabout words. If we set the blunt expression, i.e. words that for some reason cannot be said or written directly, is "A" and the euphemism is "B", then in a certain context, "A" and "B" are identical and can be replaced by each other. The substitution can be formularized as "A is B".

The semantics of euphemisms have two levels of meanings--exterior and interior. The exterior meaning is auspicious, implicit, polite, inclusive and beautified meanings, and the interior meaning is the euphemized objects which are normally unpleasant things or events. In addition to seeing euphemisms as the semantic substitution, we will further explore how the two levels of semantics are combined and united and why euphemisms can be used to refer to the things/events that are not actual referents of the euphemistic expressions.

To answer the above questions, we should not only analyze euphemisms from the aspects of linguistic features, semantic substitution and pragmatic functions, but also further study why language users can use euphemisms to refer to external things that are different from their direct referential objects. Here, for the convenience of detailed examination, we tentatively give a new definition of euphemism from a cognitive-mind perspective as follows:

An expression of "B", in place of another expression of "A" to refer to the thing/event of "A", is a euphemism, if and only if:

- 1) A' is something that cannot be expressed straightforwardly for some reason;
- 2) B cannot refer to A' in the context of the actual situation;
- 3) But can refer to A' under the specific intentionality of the language user;

4) B and A have similarity/contiguity relationships.

First, the semantic feature of euphemisms is the substitution of two expressions (A and B). The reason for the substitution is that in a particular context, the language user needs to mention things that for some reason cannot be said or written directly. “The actual situation” refers to the real life situation which people are accustomed to and tend to take as normal. In the actual situation, the direct referent of “B” is not “A”, but under the specific intentionality, “B” can be used to refer to the external thing “A”. “B” can be used to refer to “A” because of the similarity/contiguity relationship between “B” and “A”.

Intentionality includes two dimensions: intentional content and intentional attitude. Intentional content refers to the content of the language user’s consciousness activities and how such content is embodied in a certain linguistic expression. Intentional content is the content of the language user’s intentional activities, indicating the focus of his/her attention, and thus the core content of a linguistic expression. As the intentional content is the attention focus of the language user, it is the point that intentionality is positioning at. When it is embodied in linguistic forms, it is the autonomous component, i.e. the kernel of expression. The external objects that euphemistic expressions try to position at are often things or events that are not pleasant to say in a straightforward manner, such as: the old and sick, defects, errors, body organs, physiological functions, crime, war, the appellation of vulnerable groups, etc. When the language user focuses his/her attention on these things or events, the process of generating euphemisms thus starts up.

Since the same intentional content can be delivered with different attitudes, this leads to multiple ways of generating expressions and discourse. Here is another dimension involved in intentionality: intentional attitude. The intentional attitude means what kind of attitude the language user holds toward the intentional content. Any intentional content, once entering the intentionality of the language user, will be under the observation and operation of the intentional attitude. In terms of language use, intentional attitude is the basis of intentionality positioning, which can be divided into three sub-categories:

- 1) psychological state, such as beliefs, knowing, doubts, fears, hopes, love, hatred, etc.;
- 2) psychological measurement of the effect on the object, for example, the object is considered to be primary to [as opposed to “secondary”], prior to, and prominent to [as opposed to “latent”], before ... some other things;
- 3) certain psychological orientation of observing things, such as being normal (neutral), vivid, euphemistic, humorous, exaggerated, affectionate/cold, reproachful/complimentary, positive/negative, beautifying/uglifying, etc. (Xu, 2013)

As for the generation of euphemistic expressions, the intentional attitude is the basis of the language user’s intention orientation in the whole process: under the observation of psychological modes such as fear, doubt, hope, intention, etc.; under the observation of psychological measurement of behind and latent; under the observation of psychological orientations such as being roundabout, humorous, complimentary, beautifying, kind, etc., the language user chooses gentle, pleasant, inclusive, euphemistic words to replace harsh, offensive, discriminatory, and crude words. In the form of [A is B], the language user chooses B to replace A under the observation of certain psychological state, measurement and orientation.

Intentionality, as the key to human consciousness activities, is not only the starting point of the consciousness activity related to euphemism generation, but also functions through the whole generating process. Its functions can be specified as follows: triggering, orientation, and selection. The triggering effect is reflected when the language user focuses his/her attention on an external object, namely, the first positioning in the process of generating euphemisms. When the language user focuses their attention on a thing or event that cannot be said or written directly, the process of euphemism generation begins. It triggers a series of consciousness activities in the mind of the language user, and completes the process of generating euphemisms under certain conditions. After positioning, the language user focuses on the selected information to achieve the orientation of the usage event. For example, in English the euphemistic expressions for “old people” include “*sunset years*”, “*white tops*”, “*wrinkles*”, “*seasoned citizen*”, “*nursing home residents*”, and so on. These expressions have different literal meanings of their own, but they are all euphemisms that can be used to mean the “old people”. This is because under the orientation of intentionality, language user focuses on different information, that is, the different characteristics of “old people”: the last lap of the process of life, whitening hair, wrinkles on the face, colorful and rich life experience, likely to live in nursing homes, etc. The language user focuses on the different characteristics of the “old people”, realizing the orientation of the usage events, and ultimately generating different euphemisms that replace “old people”. However, people cannot arbitrarily choose an expression to replace the blunt expression to achieve euphemistic effect. “Newly-made euphemisms must be related to their original language symbols to a certain extent, and can provide the clues for people to understand what they refer to.” (Shu, 1989). The establishment of the connection between euphemisms and blunt words is the result of the intentional choice. The establishment of the connection between “old people” and “sunset” in the above example is that the subject’s intentionality is located in the structural characteristics of “sunset” and thus establishes the connection between “old people” and “*sunset*” based on the similarity. The connection between the two is based on the similarity of the “process stage”, the “old people” is the last stage of life, and “*sunset*” is the last stage of the day.

4. Collective intentionality and euphemism

Collective intentionality was originally proposed by R. Tuomela and K. Miller in the journal article of “We- intentions” published in the issue of *Philosophical Studies* in 1988. They analyze the collective intentionality with respect to individual intentionality and mutual beliefs, and believe that collective intentionality is reflected in the collective actions of members of society, on the premise that members of society have common beliefs. (Tuomela and Miller, 1988: 53) Margaret Gilbert believes that collective intentionality is the intention of each group member, and that this intention is open to the collective, and they follow the common commitment to carry out effective actions to achieve the intention (Liu, 2008: 84) John Searle believes that collective intentionality is a primary intentionality, existing in the individual’s brain the same way as the individual intentionality. (Searle, translated by Li, 2007: 116) That is to say, collective intentionality and individual intentionality coexist in the individual’s brain, and the individual has both “I-intentionality” and “we-intentionality”. Michael Bratman further proposed that the generation of collective intentionality is a kind of connection between individual intentions, not just the interaction between individuals and the external environment (Liu, 2008: 86) The philosophers have made different yet co-related

discussions on collective intentionality from different angles. From their discussion, it can be seen that collective intentionality is the basis for social activities and exchanges. Collective intentionality not only helps group members collaborate with each other but also helps intentional states shared among group members such as beliefs, wishes, intentions and the like.

According to Searle, objective social reality is literally created by means of We-intentionality. The general form of such intentionality is “X counts as Y in context C”, or “X becomes Y in context C”. (Searle, translated by Li, 2007: 120) This form can be interpreted as: X counts as Y, and the prerequisite is that the collective member C forms an agreement, acknowledging that X is Y under certain conditions. By adopting a We-intentionality that X counts as or becomes Y in C, individuals take it as a fact that X counts as or becomes Y in C. A familiar example is the institution of money, which is created by the We-intentionality to treat certain pieces of paper or metal, issued by the appropriate governmental authority, as money. The making of a promise (X) counts as getting married (Y) in the context of a marriage ceremony (C). The making of a promise can function as getting married on the premise that members of a particular community have an agreement on that and all tend to accept it accordingly.

It is through collective intentionality that people connect the mind, consciousness, language, and society. Searle believes that collective intentionality is the foundation of all social activities. Collective intentionality gives a particular group of people a shared mind and emotion and forms the basis for mutual cooperation and communication. Important ideas and viewpoints that are widely prevalent in a group are stored in people’s knowledge structure and long-term memory, and become a kind of conventional consciousness. They will be activated and used for making reference, description, comprehension and representation in certain situations. (Xu, 2006: 35)

Collective intentionality is the foundation of all social communication. Individual intentionality exists in the brain of the individual and has a private nature. Under the collective intentionality, people form a unified intentionality within a specific group, and thus cooperate and communicate on that basis. Individual intentionality is the basis of collective intentionality while collective intentionality is a set of intentions that are formed on the basis of all members of a group. At the same time, individual intentionality is subject to collective intentionality. “As for individual intentionality, collective intentionality plays a role in restricting and is useful for the identification and integration of individual intentionality. (Xu, 2006: 36) In terms of the generation of euphemistic expressions, the role of identification and integration of collective intentionality are reflected in the following aspects:

1) Euphemisms are in a constant state of flux as the tabooed objects change with the times. The euphemisms originate from social taboos. Social taboos change with the times, from the initial death taboo to the later euphemisms of illness, defects, errors, body organs, some physiological functions, indecent or inappropriate behavior. In modern times, inclusive language emerges which are used to take the place of discriminatory language. This process of change reflects the identification and integration of collective intentionality. Let us revisit Searle’s general form of collective intentionality “X counts as Y in C”, where X is the original phenomenon, X is Y under people’s collective intentionality, that is, people’s mutual agreement, consent and acceptance. Searle’s general form of collective intentionality can well explain how and why a certain things or events are seen as tabooed and need to be euphemized. X is a variety of things, events or phenomena.

Under the identification and integration of collective intentionality, that is, the agreement, consent and acceptance among group members, a certain event or thing is determined to be the euphemized object Y. For example, in the old days, “opera performance” was an industry that was despised by people in China, and its status was low in society. Under the effect of identification and integration of collective intentionality, the “opera performance” was identified as a euphemized object. That is to say, the “opera performance” is taken as a euphemized object by means of We-intentionality, its being recognized as a low-ranking and despicable industry. When it is mentioned, it needs to be replaced by euphemistic words. Therefore, there are a great number of euphemisms for actors, such as “伶伦” (*ling lun*), “伶人” (*ling ren*), “秋娘” (*qiu niang*), “小怜” (*xiao lian*), “妙音” (*miao yin*) and so on. In modern society, the social status of actors has been greatly improved, and acting has become the career most of the young people eagerly pursue. Consequently, under the effect of collective intentionality, members of society no longer recognize acting as the euphemized object, and those euphemisms relating to actors and acting that have been widely used are almost dying in daily Chinese. It can be seen that the change of euphemized objects is the result of synergistic effect between the collective intentionality and social environment.

2) Different social groups produce different euphemisms for the same tabooed object. Taking death as an example, in Chinese, “去见马克思” (*going to see Marx*) is the euphemistic expression for death. However, in English, “going to see Marx” does mean death or to die. English euphemisms for death such as “*be asleep in the Arms of God*”, “*to be with their Father*”, “*join the angels*”, “*have fallen asleep in the Lord*”, “*pay Saint Peter a visit*” do not have equivalent expressions in Chinese. That is to say, in the conventional consciousness of the Chinese, the concept of “Marx” and “death” are stored as stereotypical relations in people’s brains. Under the effect of the collective intentionality, “the stereotypical relations are retrieved as the structural premise and logical presupposition of language use”. (Xu, 2006:36) This plausibly explains why in Chinese “*going to see Marx*” can be used to mean death. However, in the conventional consciousness of people in English-speaking countries, there is no stereotypical relations between “Marx” and “death” that can be used as a structural premise of language use. In their conventional consciousness, concepts of “God”, “Father”, “angels”, “Lord”, “Saint Peter” and “death” are stored as stereotypical relations in their brains and the above euphemisms are generated under the effect of collective intentionality to indicate death.

3) Some euphemized objects cannot be found in certain languages. The categories of euphemisms in English and Chinese have a lot of commonalities, including death and funeral, diseases and disabilities, body organs, secretion and excretion, crime and punishment, war and disaster, occupation, shortcomings and mistakes. However, euphemized objects in English and Chinese also have their own characteristics. There are a large number of euphemisms of titles and appellations in Chinese, with a total of 177 entries in *Dictionary of Chinese Euphemisms* compiled by Zhang Gonggui. They are classified into three categories: “interpersonal relationship and appellation”, “couple’s titles and relationship”, “titles for other members and relationship”. In Chinese, father is respectfully called as “令尊” (*ling zun*) and “家尊” (*jia zun*), and father-in-law is respectfully called as “泰山” (*tai shan*) and “冰翁” (*bing weng*). Such euphemisms are rare in English. In the old days, China was a highly hierarchical society, advocating the norms of feudal ethical code. Under the effect of identification and integration of collective intentionality, the “interpersonal title” was identified as a euphemized object which required people to use polite and respectful

expressions to refer to. In addition, English has a lot of euphemisms about old age, and RW Holder has compiled a total of 58 old age euphemisms in *A Dictionary of Euphemism*, such as “blue hair”, “evening of your days”, “golden years”, “mature”, “middle-aged”, “senior citizens”. However, there are very few euphemisms about the old age in Chinese. Zhang Gonggui’s *Dictionary of Chinese Euphemism* contains zero entry for old age. The reason is the different orientations that the different groups make toward the old age/old age under the effect of the collective intentionality. In English-speaking cultures old age is identified as a stage of loneliness in life, and it sometimes arouses negative association in people’s mind. It is regarded as a euphemized object, which leads to many euphemistic words related to old age. Old age, however, is regarded differently in Chinese culture. In the conventional consciousness of the Han nationality, old age is a stage of rich experience and old people are normally respected in society. Therefore, it is usually not considered as a euphemized object, and the conventional consciousness of respecting the elderly is the result of collective intentionality.

In sum, collective intentionality restricts individual intentionality and has the function of identifying and integrating individual intentionality. Under the effect of collective intentionality, euphemisms are renewed as the time progresses and bear some uniqueness of a certain group.

5. Intentionality interpretation framework of euphemisms

Based on the above discussion, we summarize the intentionality interpretation framework of euphemisms as follows:

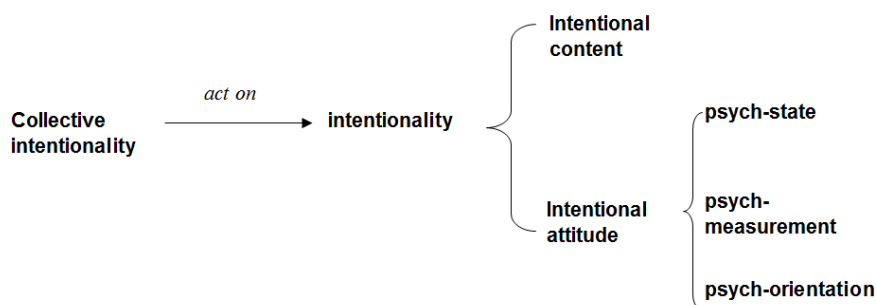


Figure 1. Intentionality interpretation framework.

1) The intentionality interpretation includes two aspects, namely collective intentionality and individual intentionality.

2) Under the effect of collective intentionality, a certain group forms common cognition, intention and emotion. Under the synergic effect of collective intentionality and social environment, the euphemisms are renewed with the time and bear features unique to a certain group.

3) Collective intentionality restricts individual intentionality and has the function of identifying and integrating individual intentionality. Individual intentionality assumes the task of “meaning incarnation”. Only with the intentional participation of individuals can the meaning be obtained in the form of intentional activities and be embodied.

4) Individual intentionality has two dimensions, namely the language user’s intentional content

and intentional attitude.

5) Intentional content is the content of the language user's intentional activities, indicating the focus of his/her attention. In the process of euphemism generation, the intentional content is the thing or event the language user focuses his/her attention on, that is, the thing or event the euphemism represents.

6) Intentional attitude is the attitude the language user holds toward the intentional content. It is the basis of the language user's intentional orientation. Intentional attitude can be divided into three sub-categories: psychological state, psychological measurement, and psychological orientation. In the process of euphemism generation, under the observation of psychological states such as fear, doubt, hope, intention, etc.; under the observation of psychological measurement of behind and latent; under the observation of psychological orientations such as being roundabout, humorous, complimentary, beautifying, kind etc., the language user chooses gentle, pleasant, inclusive, euphemistic words to replace harsh, offensive, discriminatory, and crude ones.

7) Intentional content and intentional attitude work jointly in the process of euphemism generation. There is an autonomy-dependence relationship between intentional content and intentional attitude. On the one hand, with different intentional attitudes, the same intentional content can be processed into different euphemisms. That is to say, in the formula of "A is B", "B" is not a single one; instead it is a collection of B1, B2, B3, B4... On the other hand, the same intentional attitude can be dependent on different intentional contents, thus generating different euphemisms. For example, under the effect of the psych-orientation of beautifying, barber is euphemized as "hair dresser", tailor as "fashion designer", butcher as "meat technologist", housewife as "domestic engineer".

6. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the role of intentionality in the process of generating euphemisms, and expounds and explains the relationship between individual intentionality and collective intentionality and the role of both in euphemism generation. The intentionality interpretation framework provides a unified explanation of the generation mechanism and epochal characteristics of euphemisms. This is a tentatively new way to study euphemisms, in the hope of enriching and deepening the research on euphemisms.

Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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