

A Comparative Study of English and Chinese Euphemisms—Taking Desperate Housewives and Ode to Joy as Examples

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Abstract

As the lubricant of interpersonal relationships, euphemisms are not only a linguistic phenomenon, but also a social and cultural phenomenon. At the same time, media language is also used as an important and necessary tool for communicating cultural information and ideas. Film and television productions, as cultural carriers, represent people's lifestyles, social conventions, values, and other features in a country or region. In this article, we examine "Desperate Housewives" and "Ode to Joy" as examples of euphemisms in Chinese and English. The two dramas are comparable from the standpoint of euphemism. To investigate variations indicated by diverse cultural value orientations, euphemism uses them. The goal is to illustrate the national features and cultural implications of Chinese and Western countries, as well as to better comprehend the language styles of Chinese and Western TV dramas. Lay the groundwork for cross-cultural communication by learning about the various cultural values that underpin the language.

Keywords

Euphemism, Desperate Housewives, Ode to Joy, Cultural Value Orientation

1. Introduction

With the continuous deepening of cross-cultural exchanges, excellent cultural works from all over the world have become more and more popular. The American romantic comedy Desperate Housewives (hereinafter referred to as DH) has captured the hearts of a large number of fans since its launch in 2004. Ode to Joy (hereinafter referred to as OJ) is a well-known urban youth comedy that can be found all across the country. Its popularity is because, in addition to the dramat-

ic plot and amusing lines, it also contains deeper themes like love and friendship. In both plays, the usage of various euphemisms is prevalent in the bulk of comedic situations or plots. Euphemism always accompanies the entire society's speech communication process and completely demonstrates its communicative role. Euphemism is frequently used in a variety of industries, therefore this paper, by comparing Euphemism in Chinese and Western movies and TV plays to better comprehend euphemism, will be of great use in learning English and carrying out efficient cross-cultural communication. It is a necessary component of cultural interchange and transmission. Euphemism is always present in the speech communication process of the entire society and clearly demonstrates its communicative function. Euphemism is commonly used in a variety of industries, so this paper will be very useful in learning English and carrying out effective cross-cultural communication by comparing Euphemisms in Chinese and Western movies and TV shows. It's an important part of cultural transmission and exchange.

2. The Connotation of Euphemisms

Euphemisms can generally be divided into two categories: traditional euphemisms and stylistic euphemisms. The so-called traditional euphemism is closely related to taboo words. Traditional euphemisms are intimately associated with taboo words. If clearly articulated, taboo terms such as birth, old age, disease, death, and sex are taboo words, but euphemism is the opposite. The so-called stylistic euphemisms are actually complimenting and laudatory terms, not prohibited words. Exaggeration is sometimes employed in the course of communication to change the way, to some unpleasant things with beautiful language expression, in order to express politeness, prevent embarrassment, or achieve collaboration (Liu & Yu, 2021).

3. Functions of Euphemisms

3.1. Politeness

The euphemism function of politeness is crucial. In any language, there is no scarcity of polite terms. Politeness necessitates the speaker's consideration of the other person's sentiments at all times, as well as the avoidance of tough issues and potentially unpleasant circumstances. In English, most euphemisms have a polite function, such as "washing my hands", "leave off the burden", "to go number one". Some Westerners believe it is unpleasant to outright describe someone as "fat", therefore they use the terms "chubby" or "heavy in weight" instead. In Chinese, there are numerous euphemisms for politeness, for example, excretion is described by the words "relieve nature", and "powder my nose". In terms of obesity, we would call it "grow stout", "round as pearls and smooth as jade". Extramarital affairs are referred to as "two-time" or "sleep around". These statements soften the blow of speaking up and demonstrate basic etiquette (Xu, 2021).

3.2. Avoidance of Taboo

The urge to avoid taboo spawned the first euphemism. For fear of going into trouble, some things or languages are forbidden. It's also impossible to mention the terms used to describe these things and phenomena. However, sometimes these contents must be expressed in communication, so people created a euphemism to solve this contradiction. AIDS, for instance, is a very common disease in the West, but there are no effective measures to combat it, so it is called a social disease (Li, 2004).

3.3. Disguise

The goal and function of euphemism evolve and develop with the changing in social conventions and ethos. "Cover-up" refers to the use of other words to obscure certain words. It is not only widely used in everyday life, but it is also included in a number of films and television shows. For example, "second class" is called "economy class" in the West and people have replaced "slums" with "substandard housing". In Harry Potter, Voldemort is nicknamed "the Dark Lord" or "You-Know-Who" in order to avoid calling him by his first name. In addition, a number of diplomatic euphemisms have emerged in politics. Ping-pong diplomacy, for example, is euphemistically defined as the advancement of diplomatic relations between China and the United States through ping-pong exchanges.

3.4. Humor

The ability to make your voice "pleasant" is another significant function of a euphemism; mastering such talents will make you more courteous and hilarious, but also decent to save others' faces and lighten the situation. For example, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi briefly forgot Donald Trump's name and referred to him as "what's-his-name" during an interview. Similarly, U.S. President Joe Biden emphasized his eagerness to move past his predecessor, calling him "the former guy" and lamenting: "I'm tired of talking about Donald Trump."

4. A Comparison of Euphemisms in Desperate Housewives and Ode to Joy

4.1. About Death

Throughout these two plays, different euphemisms are used for death and disease in China and the West. Some examples of DH are as follows:

Example 1: Mary Alice narrator: I was laid to rest on Monday.

"Lay to rest" means to bury. When people rest, they need to close their eyes and lie down and keep still, which is very similar to the situation after death. So they choose "rest" as an indirect expression of "death" (Qu, 2008).

Example 2: Susan: You said that he's in a better place.

"In a better place" is a euphemism for the fact that Mike has passed away. A euphemism for comforting Susan. There are a lot of words that are used instead

of death, such as “to pass away”, “to depart”, “to leave us”, “to have found rest” or “Final sleep”.

Example 3: Mr. Shaw: No. Edie Britt will disappear, and you’ll go back to your life.

Carlos: And what if she dies? People slip into comas all the time and never come out.

“disappear” and “never come out” are all euphemistic expressions of “death” in English.

Some examples of OJ are as follows:

Example 1: Wei Guoqiang told Andy: He Yunli got a terminal illness, and will not be alive soon, now in the hospital.

“will not be alive soon” is the euphemistic expression of “death” in Chinese.

4.2. About Sex

Although we all know that Western culture is open, especially when it comes to sex, this does not mean that people in western societies are allowed to use sex-related expressions on every occasion. When people talk about sex on different circumstances, they use euphemistic terms. These are the kinds of statements that, if stated bluntly, can make people uncomfortable and embarrass you. Some examples of DH are as follows:

Example 1: Susan: Julie? Mike Delfino just invited us to dinner Friday night.

Julie: He did? Cool.

Susan: but only I am going. Because you’re gonna come down with something semi-serious that requires bed-rest and fluids.

Susan, in this case, gently suggests that she might have sex with Mike to spare her daughter the embarrassment of watching her having sex with a male.

Some examples of OJ are as follows:

Example 1: Qu Xiaoxiao: When two people get together, they first have physical needs, and then they are interested in discovering their inner beauty. If you can’t get laid, there’s something wrong with you.

“get laid” is a Chinese euphemism for having sex with someone else.

4.3. About Birth

When discussing pregnancy and childbirth in Western countries, people try to avoid using the word “pregnancy” directly. When it comes to fertility, for example, individuals prefer to say “in labor”, “to come into the world” and “in a family way”. People say things like “anticipating or expecting”, “eating for two” and “wear the apron high” and “a mother-to-be” while talking about pregnancy. Carrying a baby is an unpleasant experience for women in British and American cultures. Westerners, influenced by their religious culture, feel that the fetus is a gift from God and that no one has the right to interfere with the regular reproductive process. As a result, in countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States, the question of birth control and abortion is extremely delicate.

The former is known as B.C., which stands for birth control, the procedure, bring it away, and illegal operation. These euphemisms are frequently connected with western fertility policy. Contrary to popular belief, Chinese people consider children to be a blessing, thus pregnancy is a wonderful thing, since it is “in a delicate state of health”, “not feeling well”, “eat sour things” and so on. In China, family planning is a fundamental government; therefore, there are few euphemisms for birth control or abortion in the vocabulary. Some examples of DH are as follows:

Example 1: Lynette: Oh, god, you know about the twins.

Carlos: Well, I mean, yeah, I have eyes.

Lynette: Okay, first of all, this was not planned.

“This was not planned” here means to accidentally get pregnant, which avoids awkward situations and impolite conversation.

Some examples of OJ are as follows:

Example 1: Andy asked: Wei Guoqiang, when you ran away, did you know that my mother was expecting a baby?

“expecting a baby” is a euphemism for pregnancy in Chinese, and there are many other terms in China and the West that are comparable.

4.4. About Body and Appearance

The term “body appearance” refers to a person’s height, weight, beauty, or ugliness. Obesity is prevalent in western countries, particularly the United States. Obesity-related health-care programs are quite expensive in Western countries. As a result, obese people often start unpleasant debates, so they use obscure terms to mask the truth. In China, too, making critical comments about others’ bodies or outright remarking on one’s body image can lead to embarrassment; therefore, people tend to use euphemistic phrases to describe it. Some examples of DH are as follows:

Example 1: Carlos: If she knew you got a boob job? She might consider it.

Lynette: Boob job?

Carlos: Sorry. Breast enhancement.

The background was that Lynette was expecting her first child, and her breasts were growing larger. Carlos, on the other hand, assumed Lynette had undergone a breast job, therefore he used the phrase “breast enhancement” to express his admiration for her.

Example 2: Salesgirl: Look, I feel for you. My niece also has a weight problem.

Gaby: My daughter does not have a weight problem. She has a baby fat, that’s all.

The background was that Gaby was shopping for a princess outfit for her daughter Junita, however, due to her obesity, Junita was unable to fit into the largest princess dress. Rather than calling Junita fat, she tried to lighten the situation by claiming her niece has a weight problem.

Some examples of OJ are as follows:

Example 1: Qu Xiaoxiao: Tell Xiao Qiu not to scream so that some people won't eat tofu.

The background was that Qiu Yingying twisted her foot and requested Zhao Qiping to assist her to keep an eye on it. Qu Xiaoxiao was still enraged with Zhao Qiping, therefore she had the following conversation: "eat tofu" means someone mooch off you.

Example 2: Fan: I have material and I have quality. You deserve me.

"I have material" is a euphemism for a decent figure in Chinese in a monologue by Fan Shengmei. Many Chinese adjectives exist to describe a good body in everyday life, such as "soft and graceful", "protruding and warping". When describing overweight people, the Chinese commonly use the words "plump and smooth-skinned", "full and round" whereas when describing thin people, they commonly use the words "thin and bony", "pretty waist". When describing a short person, they commonly use the words "dainty and cute", "a timid and lovable little girl".

4.5. About Occupation

Professional euphemism refers to the process of beautifying, mimicking, and elevating some lowly occupations in order to increase their social status, not just to escape the shame. Landscape architects, for example, are known as landscape architects, while butchers are known as meat technologists, and Chinese people refer to individuals who help others clean up by the hour as employees. The man who sweeps the streets is known as a sanitation worker. Some examples of DH are as follows:

Example 1: Lynette: Um, I heard back from that couple's counselor.

In the Western world, marriage counseling is a fairly popular profession. Marriage and family counselors are professionals that offer advice and counseling to those who are having problems with their love lives, marriages, or families. They will follow professional ethics, preserve the seekers' personal privacy and provide superior service to the seekers.

Example 2: Gaby: What do you mean, new cleaning lady? Where's Ivana?

"New Cleaning Lady" is a euphemism that gives respect and understanding. Hairdressers, for example, are referred to as beauticians. Vision engineers are optometrists. Housewives are referred to as household executives.

Some examples of OJ are as follows:

Example 1: Qu Xiaoxiao: If this happens to you, I will complain to the property manager.

Property manager, which includes management workers and security guards, is referred to as "estate". In Chinese, euphemisms such as "the caretaker" and "urban purity" are common.

4.6. About Greetings

The language of greetings and greetings, as well as the language of meetings, is

often used in People's Daily lives because of its brevity and simplicity. You should constantly greet your friends or acquaintances, whether you are in China or the West. However, Chinese and Western greetings are not the same. Different cultures, histories, and customs exist in different countries. If you don't pay attention to the differences between Chinese and Western greetings, you'll have a lot of negative consequences, such as words that don't mean what they say or don't comply with expressive forms, which will lead to unneeded misunderstandings and, eventually, communication failure. As a result, we must learn to avoid these situations. Some examples of DH are as follows:

Example 1: Mike: I'm sorry about your house. How are you holding up?

Eddie: All right. I guess. Oh, is somebody having a party?

In the backdrop, Eddie wants to meet up with Mike, and Mike greets her and inquires about her well-being. When people meet in the West, they say "good morning" and "good evening". In general, chat about the current circumstances, "how do you do" and "how are you".

Example 2: Pashmutti: How are you feeling?

Bree: Well. Mr.pashmutti.

In the west, the way of greeting is usually Mr.+ surname. In this example, Bree used to call Mr.+ surname as a sign of respect. Chinese address forms, on the other hand, differ slightly from those used in the West. In Chinese culture, what is acceptable in English may be rude. Chinese address language, for example, reflects the history and practice of honoring the elderly. As a result, the elderly are commonly referred to as "老 + 姓". Respected old-timers should be addressed as "某老 + 某老先生".

Some examples of OJ are as follows:

Example 1: Qu Xiaoxiao: I'm Qu Xiaoxiao. I moved here today. From now on, we will be neighbors.

When Qiu Yingying and her friends initially moved in, this was Qu Xiaoxiao's greeting to them. When people meet for the first time in China, they frequently start with the other's situation or trend. When they greet each other, they also tend to express concern for others.

Example 2: Andy: At least we're in Thailand. Let's have some real Thai food.

The background is that BaoYiFan wants Andy to hang out with him and meet him with Thai food while he sleeps. In China, we normally begin by saying "Have you had your meal yet", "What are you eating later" is a good way to start a conversation with a friend or family member alternatively "What are you up to these days".

4.7. About Gratitude

Gratitude is a person's acceptance of others' encouragement or others' provision of convenience, grace, or interests in order to enhance their own growth, progress, perfection, completion, and success, out of a heart of gratitude, with words and deeds to convey gratitude to each other's behavior. There are also va-

riances in thanking others between English and Chinese. “Thank you” is a common phrase in English, however, it is sometimes only polite. Customers and salesmen, for example, express gratitude to one another at the conclusion of a transaction. However, according to Chinese tradition and the vast majority of people’s current habits, you cannot use the word of thanks to him if it is the completion of a task within the scope of work and the performance of responsibility, because the Chinese word of thanks is mostly used for receiving favors from others. Some examples of DH are as follows:

Example 1: Gaby: Carlos and I will never be able to thank you enough.

Example 2: Gaby: Jean wait.

Jean: What is it? Is there a problem?

Gaby: No, no. It’s perfect. I just want to tell you how helpful you’re been to me over the years and I’m really grateful. Thank you!

Thank someone with care in English. People in English-speaking countries often express their gratitude by saying “thank you” believing that excessive thankfulness will only make people feel bad.

Some examples of OJ are as follows:

Example 1: Qiu Yingying: Thank you, Xie Tong.

Example 2: Fan shengmei: Bai Chuan, thank you so much for this year. And I invited you here to thank you. You’ve been my biggest rock for over a year.

When Chinese people feel grateful to others, they express their thanks fully and make an effort to repay them. For example, to express her gratitude to Wang Baichuan, Fan Shengmei invited him to supper.

4.8. About Praise

Praise is a typical occurrence in social communication. It is a communicative activity in which someone or something is openly complimented to express respect, and admiration. Compliments in English-speaking countries tend to emphasize people’s intelligence, skills, performance, and so on. “Individual struggle” and “individuality embodiment” are prominent themes in Western civilization. As a result, pleasant compliments regarding a person’s appearance, particularly clothing and hair, are more likely to be welcomed by women. Women, for example, are frequently complimented with phrases like “You look gorgeous today” or “You look sexy”. Women, on the other hand, will be overjoyed to receive a thank you note. This doesn’t seem out of place to them because their parents frequently say the same thing about their daughters. However, in traditional Chinese society, male admiration of the other sex is frowned upon, and Chinese women frequently refer to the man as a “rascal”. In the opinion of the Chinese people, this reasoning is largely unacceptable. In China, men rarely praise women, and women rarely praise men; otherwise, it is seen as frivolous, immoral, or motivated by ulterior reasons. Some examples of DH are as follows:

Example 1: Gaby: You look amazing. Younger than ever.

Example 2: Colleagues: Oh! That’s a fantastic suit.

Lynette: Hm, thanks!

In Western cultures, expressing thanks for symmetrical praises is popular, and expressing thankfulness is the same as accepting compliments. They frequently express their gratitude in a frank manner.

Some examples of OJ are as follows:

Example 1: Fan Shengmei: Andy, sorry. I want to have coffee with my friends later. I have a lot of topics to talk about.

Andy: Ok, I can take them home. Thank you, come and help me. I can take care of the rest by myself.

Example 2: Qiu Yingying: Andy, your dress is really gorgeous.

Andy: Thank you.

Praise in Chinese culture is also given to communities rather than individuals, and cooperation is favored above individualism. As a result, in Example 1, Fan-Shengmei expresses gratitude to her sisters for their assistance.

5. Different Cultural Value Orientations Reflected by the Differences in the Use of Euphemisms in Desperate Housewives and Ode to Joy

5.1. Differences in Hierarchy

The concept of hierarchy, according to people's universal subjective consciousness, classifies everything they observe according to their status, while also endowing those with unique authority and dignity (Li, 2004). It refers to the division of people into different classes in human society based on their ancestors and social accomplishments. Westerners are known for their strong sense of egalitarianism. Everyone, regardless of wealth or poverty, respects himself and does not allow others to encroach on his rights. At the same time, everyone may respect each other completely. Few people in America are proud of their distinguished ancestors, and even fewer are ashamed of their poor beginnings. However, in China, the old hierarchical paradigm of emperor and minister, father and son, has been deeply established in the thoughts of Chinese people since ancient times. In the eyes of children, parents have absolute authority, and teachers have absolute authority in the eyes of students. Family history continues to play a significant part in people's development. Some examples of DH are as follows:

Example 1: 13th episode of Season 1 Julie's mother, Susan, catches her kissing Zach and tries to reason with her.

Example 2: When Danielle's mother Bree saw her trying to eat the forbidden fruit, Bree said, "We need to talk".

They propose equality from the standpoint of western culture, where parents and children may communicate equally and chat like friends. Not as a senior citizen.

Some examples of OJ are as follows:

Example 1: GuanJuer introduces XieTong to her parents, but when GuanJuer's mother learns that XieTong has never attended college. And then she

changes her mind.

After GuanJuer and XieTong get together, GuanJuer takes XieTong to see her parents in an attempt to persuade them to approve of their love. When a couple in China starts dating, they meet with their parents and seek their consent. The Chinese place a high value on hierarchy.

5.2. Differences in Family Values

The term “family values” refers to an individual’s perspective, attitude, or conviction about family matters, as well as a benchmark for judging the meaning and purpose of family and the ideal family. In China and the West, distinct interpretations of family concepts exist. In Western countries, the concept of individualistic interests reigning supreme has always pervaded family relationships. Parents are not allowed to visit their children’s rooms in American families with low family values. When a youngster reaches the age of 18, he can leave home and live on his own, becoming financially self-sufficient and no longer reliant on his parents. When children grow up and marry, they will no longer want to live with their parents and will require their own space. Children are not required to help their parents. However, in China, we place a huge priority on familial affection. Our safe haven is our home. Parents will leave their children their greatest resources and money, such as buying vehicles and houses for them. When children reach adulthood, they must assist their parents. Some examples of DH are as follows:

Example 1: John’s parents approach Gabrielle and request that she leave their kid with them. Gabrielle directs them to inform their son. John’s parents claim that their son is now 18 years old and has moved out.

Example 2: Susan inherited a large inheritance from her ex-husband Karl, and when she found that her husband Mike was facing bankruptcy, she offered to assist him, but Mike declined. We can observe the western concept of children in the first scenario. Children will move out and live and work alone after they become 18, in order to develop their abilities to live independently (Huang, 2010).

We can observe the western concept of children in the first scenario. Children will move out and live and work alone after they become 18, in order to develop their abilities to live independently. The second example is that economic freedom has influenced the West since childhood. Mike’s excellent self-esteem also prevents him from using Karl’s funds. As a result, Mike eventually declares bankruptcy and takes his family out of Wisteria Lane (Wei, 2021).

Some examples of OJ are as follows:

Example 1: Fan Shengmei’s mother requested that she return the majority of her monthly pay to her. Because her mother was unemployed and her brother was a slacker, she was forced to support the entire family.

Example 2: When Qu returned to China after studying abroad, her wealthy family purchased her a house and a car. Even his business is backed by his parents.

Both of these instances are sufficient to demonstrate the distinction between

Chinese and Western thoughts. Some parents in China may favor boys and let their youngsters assist or even care for their younger brothers and sisters. Parents from wealthy families, on the other hand, will do everything possible to assist their children, rather than allowing their children to live independently and not intervening in their lives like they do in the West.

6. Conclusion

Euphemism is a communication approach that is often utilized in everyday life. Learning the differences between English and Chinese euphemisms can effectively avoid awkward topics or offend others. Based on examples of euphemism in *Desperate Housewives* and *Ode to Joy*, this study explores the roles of euphemism, contrasts distinct features of Euphemism in English and Chinese, and represents diverse cultural values.

We can also see from these two TV plays that euphemism not only expands our language but also allows us to adequately convey our sentiments and thoughts. More importantly, we can appreciate the variations between English and Chinese euphemisms, giving us a better understanding of not only European and American society but also our own local culture.

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