

A Study of Euphemisms in *The Good Doctor* from the Perspective of Adaptation Theory

Hongrui Cao

School of English Language and Culture, South China Business College of Guangdong
University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou 510545, China

Abstract

Euphemisms can be used as a lubricant for interpersonal communication and to maintain face or good relationships. Verschueren's adaptation theory, integrating cognitive, cultural and social factors, provides a fresh research perspective for the study of euphemisms. Therefore, this article, based on Verschueren's adaptation theory, takes dialogues in the medical drama, *The Good Doctor*, as the research object, and studies euphemisms. This research found that euphemisms have evasive function, polite function and cosmetic function. This paper not only has a huge enlightening effect on English learners in cross-cultural communication, but also provides feasible suggestions for alleviating the strained doctor-patient relationship.

Keywords

Adaptation Theory; Euphemisms; *The Good Doctor*.

1. Introduction

Language is a fundamental tool for human interaction and the exchange of information. As social beings, people often avoid mentioning unpleasant topics in order to maintain good relationships. This is where euphemism plays a crucial role.

Various scholars have defined the term "euphemism" in different ways. Allen described euphemisms as mild terms used to replace direct or insulting expressions [1]. Hu Zhuanglin defined them as words considered less offensive or unpleasant than their alternatives [2]. While these definitions differ in wording, they share a common emphasis on avoiding direct reference to unpleasant subjects. Over time, euphemism has evolved from a simple marker of politeness to a broader communicative strategy, which explains why the use of euphemisms is often necessary: to maintain good relationships with others. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, a euphemism is "the substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive expression for one that may offend or suggest something unpleasant [3]." In other words, people tend to replace harsh or direct language with more polite alternatives that still convey the intended meaning. As Enright stated in his book *Fear of Speech: The Uses of Euphemism*, "A language without euphemisms would be a defective instrument of communication. Without euphemisms, the world would grind, uncoiled, to a halt, universal animosity covering all [4]." In short, euphemisms are essential for maintaining positive personal relationships.

Besides, euphemism is a context-dependent concept. Its use involves multiple factors, including social and psychological ones. Verschueren's adaptation theory offers a broad cognitive, social, and cultural framework for understanding language use. According to this theory, speakers constantly make linguistic choices based on context to achieve effective communication. The theory helps to highlight the dynamic nature of euphemism by showing that language use is a continuous process of adapting to both linguistic and communicative contexts.

In many situations, especially in medical settings, it is both important and necessary to soften potentially offensive language. For example, doctors must be aware of their patients' emotional

states. *The Good Doctor*, a medical drama aired on ABC, tells the story of Shaun Murphy, a surgeon with savant-syndrome working in a prestigious hospital. The show not only explores the challenges of the medical profession but also raises questions about whether someone with limited social communication skills can effectively interact with patients. The drama contains numerous interactions among people from different professional backgrounds, making euphemism an essential part of communication. As such, it provides a rich source of material for studying euphemism through the lens of Verschueren's adaptation theory.

2. Adaptation Theory

Adaptation Theory was first proposed by Belgian pragmatist Jef Verschueren. He initially mentioned the concept in the *Working Document of the International Pragmatics Association (IPrA)* in 1987, but it was not fully developed until he systematically introduced it in his book *Understanding Pragmatics*. According to this work, Verschueren argued that "using language must consist of the continuous making of linguistic choices, consciously or unconsciously, for language-internal and/or language-external reasons" [5]. In other words, when people interact, they constantly make choices influenced by both linguistic factors (such as pronunciation and grammatical form) and non-linguistic factors (such as social and psychological elements). Some of these choices are intentional, while others are made unconsciously. This view highlights the role of cognitive, social, and cultural factors in pragmatics, and Adaptation Theory provides a new perspective for studying language use.

2.1. Making Choices

Verschueren emphasized that "the process of language use must involve a series of linguistic choices which are made based on some language-internal or language-external factors" [5]. He clarified this idea through the following seven aspects:

Firstly, this process of choice-making can be made at any level of structure, including vocabulary, intonation, grammatical form, etc., due to the variety of language. These choices may have minor or significant consequences. Besides, any level of choice making can be made at the same time instead of being in a linear order.

Secondly, speakers would like to choose both the forms and strategies. That, more specifically, means that speakers make choices not only about linguistic forms but also about communicative strategies, drawing from every possible structural level [5].

Thirdly, this choice-making act is out of the consciousness, which suggests that some choices are made deliberately, while others occur without the speaker's awareness.

Fourthly, the speaker who utters a sentence not only just makes a statement but also interprets the sentence. Both processes share the same importance.

Fifthly, the speaker is pushed in a corner of making choices once the utterance has been made. That is to say communication always carries a certain level of risk.

Sixthly, not all choices are equally acceptable. Some are preferred over others. For instance, people are more likely to ask "How tall are you?" than "How short are you?"

Lastly, the act of making a choice opens up different possibilities for the speaker.

2.2. Three Properties of Language

To further explain the process of making choices, Verschueren introduced three key properties of language: variability, negotiability, and adaptability [5].

Variability is such a language property that it enables language users to choose from a variable range of options [5]. It refers to the fact that language users can choose from a wide range of linguistic options. The range of options is constantly changing and applies both synchronically and diachronically.

Negotiability refers to the language property that language users make their choices based on some highly flexible principles or strategies rather than anything fixed or static [5]. It involves uncertainty: speakers may select from many potential options, interpreters may choose their own way of understanding, and translators may constantly renegotiate meanings.

Adaptability is such a language property that it enables people to make negotiable options from quantities of possibilities so as to satisfy communicative needs to the utmost extent [5]. Some points should be aware of this adaptability. A. Technically, there is no strict meaning of “communicative needs”; B. “Needs” do not refer to general needs but some specific needs required in some scenarios; C. The satisfaction of the communicative needs varies from different language users; D. Adaptability is not one-way but two-way.

These three concepts are hierarchical in nature. Variability and negotiability provide the foundation for adaptability. Without them, adaptability cannot be properly understood. At the same time, the three properties are interrelated and inseparable.

2.3. Adaptation Process of Euphemism

Among these three properties, adaptability plays the most crucial role in communication. A communicative context includes the mental world, social world, and physical world. Verschueren illustrated this relationship in his model of “Contextual Correlates of Adaptability”.

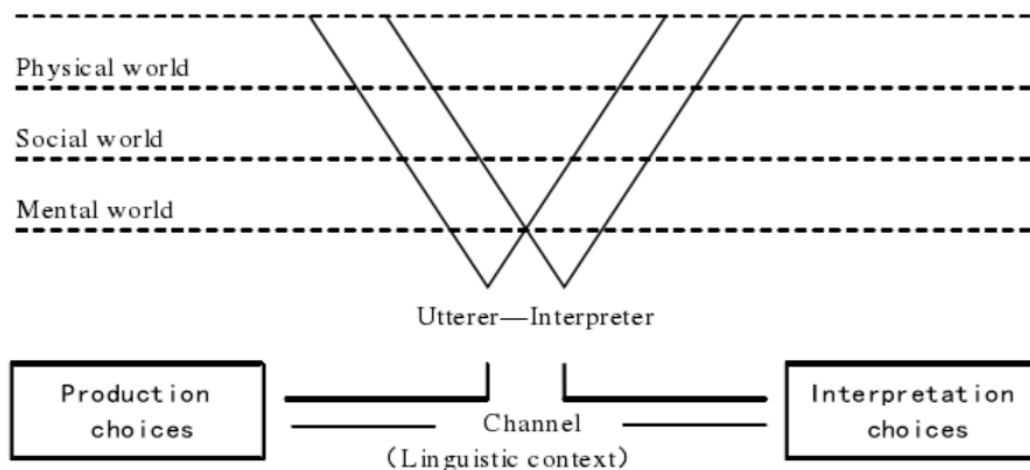


Figure 1: Contextual Correlates of Adaptability

According to the above Figure 1, the main focus has been put on language users, U (utters) and I (interpreters), who are the beginning of this communicative activity. It is they who active the whole contextual facets of the mental, social and physical world as well as play the functional roles. Thus, the adaptation process of euphemism could be studied from the adaptation to language users, physical world, social world, and mental world, which is called nonlinguistic context [5].

About the adaptation to language users, Verschueren pointed out that utterers are not necessarily the sole source of information [5]. He introduced the concept of the “virtual utterer” and classified interpreters’ roles into addressees, side participants, and non-participants, with non-participants further divided into bystanders and overhearers. By using euphemisms, the speaker can soften the tone and avoid direct confrontation, saving the opponent’s face and avoiding the embarrassment of both sides.

Although euphemisms are spoken, they reflect deeper cognitive and psychological processes. The mental world relates to the speaker’s state of mind. Euphemisms can be used to maintain relationships by considering the listener’s feelings.

In the social world, the social factors are related to social settings or institutions, which may affect speakers' linguistic choices. Besides, the social relationship between speaker and listener is more decisive in determining the kind of expression the speaker uses. Generally speaking, euphemism plays an important role in the lubrication of social power relations that can make the communication go smoothly.

The physical world refers to objective conditions such as time and place, as well as non-verbal factors like eye contact, gestures, and movements [7]. Non-verbal euphemisms usually soften the negative impact, making the message less painful. This shows how euphemism adapts dynamically to non-verbal cues in the physical world.

3. A Case Study in *The Good Doctor*

This thesis examines the first season of *The Good Doctor*, a medical drama that follows Shaun Murphy, a surgeon whose condition limits his ability to communicate and engage with others in typical ways. Naturally, Shaun faces challenges when interacting with colleagues, supervisors, and patients. For someone like Shaun, engaging in ordinary conversation is already difficult, let alone using euphemisms to soften unpleasant truths or avoid awkward situations.

The drama offers a wide array of interpersonal scenarios across diverse characters, creating a rich and detailed corpus of communicative contexts. Studying Shaun's gradual acquisition of social and linguistic skills, especially his use of euphemisms, provides meaningful insights for English learners navigating cross-cultural communication as well as for medical professionals seeking to improve patient interactions. Thus, the following part will respectively analyze the adaptation process of euphemisms to language users, physical world, social world, and mental world.

3.1. Adaptation Process of Euphemisms to Language User

Verschueren has distinguished between different types of listeners, including addressees, side participants, and non-participants, with non-participants. This classification underscores the complexity of communication, emphasizing that understanding an utterance requires considering the multiple potential interpreters who may receive or process the information, whether directly or indirectly. He has mentioned a scenario, when a third party is present, speakers are often more careful to protect the listener's face than when they are alone. The number of listeners present also significantly affects the speaker [7], which could be well explained in the example below.

Example 1:

Shaun: I want D-dimer, lactate, and amylase...

Dr. Melendez: What tests are you ordering?

Shaun: D-dimer, lactate, and amylase.

Dr. Melendez: For a tummy ache? Hmm?

Shaun: Yes. I'm concerned it may be... (looking around) Shall we talk outside?

...

Dr. Melendez: Yeah. Let's talk outside.

In the dialogue, Shaun's use of euphemism demonstrates an adaptation in his language. He demonstrates his growing awareness of interpersonal dynamics in the hospital, which is to be careful and cautious when diagnosing and discussing a patient's condition.

In this scene, he is about to run tests for a girl with a tummy ache but notices something unusual. As his supervisor, Dr. Melendez, entered the room, Shaun hesitates to speak his mind, recognizing that other people are present. By suggesting to move the conversation to a more private place with fewer participants, Shaun carefully manages the situation, which suggests

that he avoids revealing an unconfirmed diagnosis in front of others, maintaining politeness and preventing potential annoyance due to his unconfirmed diagnosis. The euphemistic request allows him to present his findings without causing immediate conflict. This moment illustrates how even a surgeon with social communication challenges can use euphemistic strategies to navigate sensitive interactions.

3.2. Adaptation Process of Euphemisms to Mental World

In the mental world, the psychological states of the speaker and listener also need to be adapted. In daily human interaction, language is a tool for communication between one brain and another. As an important component of context, the mental world involves the communicators' psychological states, including personality, emotions, motivations, and intentions [7]. Thus, euphemisms, as a buffer, often are used to adapt somebody's psychological state.

Example 2:

Dr. Melendez: You know, it doesn't make you any less of a surgeon, having me in there as your second.

Dr. Andrews: I'm the Chief. You're my attending.

Dr. Melendez: Can't argue with that.

Dr. Andrews: And we both know what your presence in my O.R. will say.

Dr. Melendez: That's not my intention.

Dr. Andrews: It's the impact. Intention doesn't matter. *Thanks... but I'm good.*

Dr. Andrews was the chief of surgeons. In this scenario, Aoki who run the financial sector of this hospital had talked with Dr. Andrews to give special attention and care to a VIP patient who was a potential donor to the running of the hospital. For the sake of making everything smooth, she asked Dr. Melendez, a very excellent surgeon, to help Dr. Andrews who was confident or even a little arrogant.

In this dialogue, Dr. Melendez tries to reassure Dr. Andrews by saying, "You know, it doesn't make you any less of a surgeon, having me in there as your second." On the surface, this is a polite and supportive remark, softening the fact that Andrews' authority might be questioned. From the perspective of the mental world, this euphemism adapts to Andrews' psychological state, which is his pride, sense of authority, and concern about professional image. However, he rejects the reassurance, making it clear that his identity and authority matter more than Melendez's intention. He used "thank you, but I am good" as a refusal to turn down Dr. Melendez. This usage illustrates how euphemism can communicate refusal while maintaining politeness. Rather than bluntly declining Dr. Melendez's help, he reduces potential friction by softening his language, demonstrating professional tact and careful emotional management.

Example 3:

Dr. Glassman: How you doing?

Claire: The computer is not working.

Dr. Glassman: That's not what I'm talking about.

Claire: I know. I'm fine.

Dr. Glassman: A patient died because of something you did. I think it's safe to say the one thing you are not is "fine."

Claire: I'm dealing.

In this dialogue, euphemism works as a psychological buffer to adapt to Claire's emotional state. Claire made a pretty silly mistake leading a female losing her life. She was sad and did not know how to deal with this mess just because of her unprofessional mistake. When Dr. Glassman asks, he is not literally asking about Claire's condition with the computer but rather her feelings after a patient's death. Claire initially avoids direct reference to her emotions, replying, "The

computer is not working,” and then, “I’m fine.” These are classic euphemistic responses, downplaying her inner turmoil to protect her self-image and to avoid exposing vulnerability.

From the perspective of the mental world, Claire’s choice of euphemism adapts to her own need for emotional defense. At the same time, it reflects her awareness of social expectations in the medical workplace, where showing weakness might be seen as unprofessional. The final line is still euphemistic, which acknowledges her struggle while maintaining composure, showing how euphemism mediates between inner emotions and external communication needs.

3.3. Adaptation Process of Euphemisms to Social World

The fidelity rule requires the translation should, to some extent, be loyal to the source text that is usually exotic. Liu has used the translation methods of literal translation and paraphrase to keep the exotic feature, broadening the reader’s horizon and providing a platform to know Chinese culture.

As social animals, humans inevitably engage in social contact, and social elements like status, conventions, and occupations influence our behaviors. Euphemisms are often used to tactfully navigate social hierarchies and sensitive topics, helping speakers manage interactions smoothly within a given context.

Example 4:

Claire: Olivia Hartman?

Olivia: Yes, ma'am. I mean Doctor.

Claire: You're 18?

Olivia: Yes, ma'am.

Claire: Where's the boil?

Olivia: It's, um... It's down there.

Shaun: Down where?

Claire: Shaun. It's, um, on her labia.

Claire: Hmm. Is it painful?

Olivia: Like I used a bowling ball for a tampon.

...

Claire: I'm sorry. I know this hurts, but I really do need to insert a speculum for this part of the exam.

Olivia: If I really have what he says, does that mean you have to cut off my...

In the provided dialogue, the use of euphemisms is a prime example of linguistic adaptation within the social world. First, the dialogue demonstrates an adaptation to status. When Olivia says, "Yes, ma'am. I mean Doctor," she immediately corrects herself. This shows her awareness that in the context of a medical institution, so she quickly adjusts her language to fit the social hierarchy and institutional setting.

Second, the euphemisms primarily serve to handle the sensitive topic of a private body part. No matter in which society, everything related to sex seems to be a taboo that cannot be mentioned directly. And living under such a social convention, people are somehow got influenced by it. Thus, the girl preferred to use “down there” instead of stating the name of her genital. This linguistic choice is an act of face-saving, avoiding the discomfort that could come from being too blunt. Even the doctor, Claire, pauses slightly before saying "on her labia," a small adaptation that shows her empathy and awareness of the sensitivity of the topic, even while maintaining professional clarity.

Finally, the dialogue reveals how euphemisms help manage emotions and fear. When Olivia cannot bring herself to complete the sentence "cut off my...", this linguistic break reflects her psychological vulnerability and fear of the potential outcome. Claire, in response, quickly shifts

the conversation back to a professional medical context by using terms like "abscess" and "chlamydia infection." This is an adaptive strategy that both acknowledges the patient's emotional state and uses professional authority to reassure her, grounding the conversation in medical fact rather than emotional dread.

The euphemisms in this dialogue are deliberate acts of linguistic adaptation that allow the speakers to navigate a sensitive situation, respect social status, manage a delicate topic, and effectively handle emotions. This process of adaptation ensures the conversation proceeds smoothly and maintains harmony and effectiveness in the social interaction.

3.4. Adaptation Process of Euphemisms to Physical World

The physical world refers to objective conditions such as time and place, as well as non-verbal factors like eye contact, gestures, and movements [7]. Temporal reference and spatial reference are the two major factors in the physical world which have an effect on language users' linguistic choices, which can be well shown in the following examples.

Example 5:

Dr. Melendez: And we really don't have the time.

Patient's fiancée: It matters.

Patient's mother: She doesn't know him like...

Patient's fiancée: Maybe none of us do, but...

Patient's mother: But we are his parents, and you're not his wife. Yet.

In this scenario, a couple was on their way to their wedding when a car accident occurred. The groom-to-be was seriously injured, and doctors debated whether to amputate his leg. This presented a difficult dilemma, as his fiancée and parents held different opinions on the matter. Legally, the decision-maker depended on their marital status: had they been married, his wife would have had the final say, but since they were not, his parents had the authority to decide for him.

Here, the temporal reference of "yet" significantly influences the mother's linguistic choice. The mother's use of "yet" is a direct and precise linguistic choice that hinges on the temporal fact that her son and his fiancée are not married at this moment. This single word becomes the basis for her argument that the fiancée has no legal authority now.

Furthermore, the reference analysis correctly points out the politeness function of "yet." By including this word, the mother acknowledges the fiancée's future role as a wife. What she wanted to convey was "Sorry, honey, you are not official married now, so it is I who can make this decision for him right now." The euphemistic usage of "yet" makes the whole sentence a conditional, time-bound statement. Through this temporal reference, the mother manages to protect the fiancée's face while asserting parental authority.

Example 6:

Shaun: It was a good day. We saved a life... just not Chuck's.

(Reaching out his hand toward Claire and trying to give her a pat)

Shaun's non-linguistic action of reaching out his hand but not making physical contact is a clear example of spatial reference in communication. This is a key element of the physical world that influences our linguistic and non-linguistic choices.

The intended message of his action is one of comfort and friendship, which is typically communicated through close, intimate space, like a hug or a pat on the shoulder. However, due to his autism, Shaun has an internal barrier that makes physical contact difficult. He adapts his communication by using a non-linguistic euphemism. The gesture of almost-touching becomes a powerful communicative act that conveys his emotional support without violating his own personal spatial boundaries or Claire's. This choice functions as a form of politeness, as it shows

his desire to be a supportive friend while respecting his own limitations. In this instance, the physical distance between them is not an obstacle to communication but rather a factor that shapes the very form of it, making his gesture a meaningful expression of support.

4. Conclusion

Euphemisms dynamically adapt to a variety of components in a communicative context. Medical dramas often meticulously portray the complex social dynamics within a hospital setting. The intricate web of relationships among surgeons, patients, and superiors makes every interaction a delicate matter. Therefore, a deep understanding of social elements is crucial for navigating communication within the hospital.

People use euphemisms for a variety of reasons, and they generally serve three main functions: evasive, polite, and cosmetic. First, euphemisms help us navigate sensitive and taboo topics, allowing us to communicate without being rude or causing offense. Using euphemisms to talk about these topics helps maintain social harmony and avoid discomfort.

Second, politeness is a fundamental part of social interaction and a key to building positive relationships. By using polite language, people soften harsh expressions, save the opponent's face and then facilitate smoother communication.

Lastly, euphemisms also serve a cosmetic function by modifying and enhancing language. This is particularly important in professional settings, such as a hospital, where patients are often in a fragile physical and mental state. Doctors use euphemisms to make difficult news sound better and easier for patients to accept, demonstrating empathy and care. By making these linguistic choices, they can better support a patient's emotional well-being.

This medical drama also offers valuable insights into managing the often-tense doctor-patient relationship. It demonstrates how doctors can learn to interact more effectively with patients by considering their emotional and psychological states. This shows that a harmonious relationship is a two-way street. Patients are also encouraged to be tolerant and patient with doctors, showing understanding and empathy. Only through mutual effort can a better, more trusting doctor-patient relationship be established.

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