

Phraseological Euphemisms in Modern English

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Annotation:

Teaching phraseology in foreign teaching methodology plays a significant role in forming vocabulary and lingua-cultural competence of students as phraseological units encapsulate a national, country's cultural outlook. In this article, we try to define phraseological concepts in teaching and learning English and discuss the formation of phraseological units.

Keywords: Phraseology, phraseological units, vocabulary, words, definition, language, phrase, formation of phraseological units.

The term “euphemism” (from Greek “eu” – “well”, “phemi” – “I am speaking”) has been used to denote a definite stylistic device for many centuries. As a linguistic phenomenon it has been analyzed since the XIXth century but only in the last decades the problem of euphemisms acquired its widespread popularity.

Linguists analyze different types of euphemisms as parts of lexical system of different languages. The problem of phraseological euphemisms hasn't been in the focus of scientists' attention yet. On the whole, the process of euphemisation is considered to be a complex and many-sided linguistic phenomenon characterized by three interrelated and interconnected aspects: social, psychological and linguistic proper. The most important is the linguistic one which is connected with meliorative language evaluation of something negative existing in the real world. Linguists are united in their opinion that euphemisms are extralinguistic in their nature. Still there is a great divergency of opinions concerning social and psychological causes of euphemisms, the most important criteria of euphemisation, stylistic reference and the usage of euphemisms in real speech.

All these testifies to the actuality of the problem analyzed.

The novelty of the paper is dictated by the fact that phraseological euphemisms haven't been the object of scientific investigation so far. In a limited number of works they were analyzed together with other phraseological units belonging to some phraseo-semantic fields (e.g. “death”). Still they present some interest as indirect denominations of rather typical and even common phenomena of

our everyday life. The fact that they have transferred meaning also adds importance to our investigation.

Phraseological euphemisms were picked out from A.Koonin's "English-Russian Phraseological Dictionary" [2] according to the label "эвф.", some other phraseological dictionaries and books on phraseology. The author of the above mentioned dictionary includes this label into the system of stylistic labels marking at the same time that the system of stylistic labels is, to some extent, conventional. At the same time not all euphemisms are marked in the dictionary with this label. Some of them have other labels, e.g. "in a (the) family way" "пaзг." (colloquial), "be out (take, leave) of one's senses" "пaзг." (colloquial), "shoot (sling, throw) the bull" "aмep. жaпг." (Amer. jargon), "be off one's nut" "жaпг." (jargon), etc. According to the point of view of modern linguists they express notions which are considered inappropriate or rude. The image on which they are based is not rough or unpleasant, so they also belong to the group of phraseological euphemisms.

The examples of illustrative quotations are taken either from the above mentioned dictionary or from the book "Exercises in Modern English Lexicology" by L.Grinberg, M.Kuznets, A.Kumacheva and G.Meltser [1].

First of all, phraseological euphemisms will be studied from the point of view of the notions they express. Secondly, one synonymic group of phraseological euphemisms will be investigated from the point of view of different types of synonyms.

From the point of view of their semantics phraseological euphemisms (PE) may be subdivided into several groups, the most important of them are:

1. Euphemisms naming death and everything connected with it, e.g. "to breath one's last (one's last breath, gasp)", "to depart this life", "to pay one's debt to nature", "to go to one's last home", "to go the way of all flesh", "to kick the bucket", "to hop the twig", "to join the majority", "to be no more", "God's acre", etc.:

The next day, his parents were flown to New Mexico by special Army plane, and they stayed at their son's bedside, until he breathed his last.

(R.Lapp. "Atoms and People").

A strapping lad like Cliffy Benton to be smashed up and put out of his life, and all the parsons can do about it is stuff religion down y'r throat, and try to make y' believe Cliffy's gone to glory: 'God knows best.'

(K.Prichard. "Golden Miles").

Patrick Henry has already gone to his long home; Samuel Adams was soon to follow.

(Ch.Beard and M Beard. "The Rise of American Civilisation").

He did not talk to them; they had already been told exactly what each of them was to do, and who was to do what in case the first-chice man kicked the bucket or was otherwise out.

(S.Heym. "The Crusaders").

He pardoned us off-hand, and allowed us something to live on till he went the way of all flesh.

(Ch.Dickens. "Sketches by Boz", "Mr. Watkins Tottle").

Religious and moral factors are the driving forces of this group of phraseological euphemisms. Fear before death and, sometimes, the desire not to hurt a person, to show one's tact and courtesy can be considered to be the emotional basis of such PE. This group of PE is rather numerous.

2. Euphemisms naming social evils, crimes, human vices and their consequences, e.g. “three sheets in (to) the wind”, “in one’s cups”, “send somebody to glory”, “send somebody to kingdom-come”, “the Duke of Exeter’s daughter”, shoot (sling, throw) the bull”, “kiss the cup”, “have (take) a drop”, “have one too many”, “have had a few”, etc.:

They threatened to make me hug the Duke of Exeter’s daughter.

(W.Scott. “The Fortunes of Nigel”).

...he is a good unconscious spy on Brass, and tells, in his cups, all that he sees and hears.

(Ch.Dickens. “The Old Curiosity Shop”).

‘Did you have a chance to say a few words to the Governor tonight, Luke?’ he asked anxiously. ‘Sure, I was over there shooting the breeze with him just a few minutes ago’.

(E.O’Connor. “The Last Hurrah”).

Moral principles serve as a social determinant of phraseological euphemisms of this rather large group. Social evils and human vices have always been a rich source of creating such PEs.

3. Euphemisms naming poverty, hard financial situation, e.g. “be in Queer Street”, “live from hand to mouth”, “not to have a shirt to one’s back”, “not <to have> a penny to bless oneself with”; “without a penny to one’s name”, “keep body and soul together”, make <both, two> ends meet”:

Brown came to see me yesterday, and from what he told me, the poor chap doesn’t seem to have a shirt to his back. He has been out of employment for over a year now!

One of his guests, a writer of poetical drama, was a man who three months after he had earned a thousand pound, never had a penny with which to bless himself”.

(J.K.Jerome. “Paul Kever”).

Poverty has always been a very undesirable and unpleasant condition, especially in the English society. No wonder that poor people tried to conceal their poor financial situation using or inventing indirect names for it.

4. Euphemisms naming mental deformities (disability), e.g. “be out (take, leave) of one’s senses”, “be off one’s nut”, “go nuts”, “soft (touched, weak) in the head”, “a strange bird”, a weird (strange) customer”, a weird (strange) card (duck)”, etc.:

Woman, you’ve gone too far! You’re out of your senses!

(D.Carter. “Fatherless Sons”).

“He said he didn’t want to see you...” Babbit reared over him. The attendant hastily changed to a coaxing. ‘You can come back and try to-morrow. Probably the poor guy is off his nut’.

(S.Lewis. “Babbit”).

She did one good thing – the dumb girl in that Russian play. But she can’t speak for nuts; you’re following the sense of her words all the time.

(J.Galsworthy. The Silver Spoon”).

He looked out the pub window at the sky-high mountain peaks that seem to be nudging Vancouver into the sea. ‘Sometimes I think I’ll go nuts, staring at those things’.

(D.Carter. “Fatherless Sons”).

Mental and physical handicaps cause the sense of pity, sometimes disgust. No wonder that there appeared a lot of phraseological euphemisms to name them.

5. Euphemisms naming some acts or conditions from the sphere of physiology, e.g. “pay a call”, “a call of nature”, “in the straw”, “in a (the) family way”, “in nature’s garb”, “not a stitch on”, “in a state of nature”, “in one’s skin”, etc.:

The tall dark girl came to see Doctor Reefy because she was in the family way and had become frightened.

(Sh.Anderson. “Winesburg, Ohio”).

Angelina. Your friend, the bald man, the one who calls for you, where is he?

Philip. He is at the moment responding to a call of nature.

(I.Shaw. “The Gentle People”).

The little bay was so sheltered that we could bathe without a stitch to our backs.

(DEI).

It is interesting to note that the polysemantic phraseological unit “not (without) a stitch to one’s back” is a phraseological euphemism in both meanings: 1. absolutely naked; 2. very poor. Physiological function, the condition of pregnancy and human nakedness are considered to be indecent or not worth speaking about in normal society according to moral principles existing in such a society.

6. Euphemisms referring to the sexual sphere, e.g. “a lady of easy virtue”, “a light (easy) woman”, “a real battleaxe”, “a house of ill fame”, “make love” (in the second meaning):

In my bedroom we would pass the hours making love or talking and only too often quarrelling.

(Gr.Green. “The Comedians”).

It is entirely populated by crooks, stock-exchange jugglers, corrupt policemen, and ... ladies of easy virtue.

(J.Lindsay. “All on the Never-Never”).

Phraseological euphemisms belonging to one and the same phraseo-semantic group may further be subdivided into synonymic groups as there are different grammatical classes in one and the same group – verbal, substantive, adjectival, etc. Phraseological synonyms belong to the same grammatical class and are phraseological units which are the same in the plane of content but different in the plane of expression.

The majority of linguists distinguish three types of phraseological synonyms: ideographic, stylistic and stylistic-ideographic. Ideographic synonyms differ in shades of meaning or have different notional components of meaning. Their archesemes coincide but they have one or more minor differential semes in the denotational component of meaning. Stylistic synonyms have the same notional components of meaning but differ in their stylistic reference. Stylistic-ideographic synonyms have some different notional and connotational components of meaning.

There are also synonyms that coincide both in denotational and connotational components of phraseological meaning. Such synonyms are called equivalent (or equipollent) ones.

We have analyzed the synonymic group of phraseological euphemisms with the meaning “to die”. This synonymic group is rather numerous as the concept of death finds its reflection in all languages and the attitude towards this “event” is similar. “All people are mortal” is a well-known expression, so speakers of different languages as representatives of different nations and nationalities try to conceal the unpleasant emotions and painful news. Phraseological units are based on different images, the majority of such images may be considered elevated, as in such units as “go to a better

world”, “go to glory”, “go to heaven”, “go to kingdom-come”, “go to one’s last (long) home”, etc. Others are based on some “common” images, e.g. “take the ferry”, “be (go) up the flume” (in the second meaning), “to be no more”. Only a very limited number of phraseological euphemisms of this synonymic group “use” the images which can cause ironical or jocular attitude, e.g. “kick the bucket”, “to hop the twig”.

All phraseological units belonging to this group of phraseological synonyms denote one and the same action, that’s why their denotational components coincide. Differences may be observed either in emotional evaluation or stylistic reference of phraseological units.

First of all we distinguish equivalent (equipollent) phraseological synonymic euphemisms which coincide in both components of their phraseological meaning (denotational and connotational). Coincidence in their connotational components means coincidence in their evaluation, emotiveness, expressivity and stylistic reference. Death is presented in them as something positive, going to the better world, to God. Such expressions are etymologically connected with belief in God, with the Bible or were borrowed from Latin, e.g. “go to one’s last (long) home” was used in the Bible, Ecclesiastes XII, 5 [2:318]. The origin of the phraseological euphemism “join the <great> majority” dates to the Latin expression “abiit ad plures” [2:476].

Let’s present equivalent phraseological synonymic euphemisms: “join one’s ancestors”, “be gathered to one’s fathers”, “go beyond the veil”, “go the way of nature”, “go to a better world”, “go to glory”, “go to kingdom-come”, “go to one’s last (long) home”, “join the <great> majority”.

It is interesting to note that there are no ideographic phraseological synonyms in this group of PEs. Such cases are very rare, in our group of synonyms it is caused by the fact that all phraseological synonyms have the same meaning “to die” without some additional shades of denotational meaning as it is observed in other groups of phraseological synonyms.

The group of stylistic synonyms constitute the above mentioned PEs (belonging to the group of equivalent synonyms and being stylistically neutral), on the one hand, and such synonyms as “go west” (colloquial), or “go the way of all flesh” (bookish), on the other hand. They denote the same notion, coincide in their denotational component, are based on different images and belong to different stylistic layers.

The last group of phraseological synonyms – stylistic-ideographic, in our case is presented by phraseological euphemisms belonging to different stylistic layers and differentiating in emotional colouring as a subcomponent of connotation. It means that some phraseological units such as “kick the bucket”, “be (go) up the flume” (in the second meaning), “throw up the sponge” are characterized by a jocular or ironical emotiveness in comparison with other units of this synonymic group. Thus they differ in the emotive connotational subcomponent. Besides such units as “kick the bucket” (jargon), “be (go) up the flume” (American colloquial), “go west” (colloquial), “go hence”, “go beyond the veil”, etc. differs in their stylistic reference. So such phraseological euphemisms belong to the group of stylistic-ideographic synonyms.

A very good way to see the difference between the three groups of phraseological synonyms is to see the behaviour of PEs belonging to different groups in context:

‘You think I’m going to join the majority.’ ‘...Well, put it that way if you like.’

(J.Galsworthy. “Caravan”, “A Stoic”).

About one year after his wife’s death Mr.Pontifex also was gathered to his fathers.

(S.Butler. “The Way of All Flesh”).

There is a very interesting illustration of several PEs belonging to this group used in one and the same context:

‘You see, one of the boys has gone up the flume – ‘Gone where?’ ‘Up the flume – throwed up the sponge, you understand.’ ‘Thrown up the sponge?’ ‘Yes, kicked the bucket’ – ‘Ah! Has departed to that mysterious country from whose bourne no traveler returns.’ ‘Return! I reckon not. Why, pard, he’s dead.’

(M. Twain. “The Innocents at Home”).

In conclusion, the analysis of phraseological synonymic euphemisms with the meaning “to die” has shown that the synonymic group consists of different groups of synonyms: equivalent, stylistic and stylistic-ideographic. They describe the same event with the help of different images on which the PEs are based. A rather large number of PEs of this group shows us the importance of phraseological euphemisms used to satisfy the need to soften such painful news as somebody’s death.

USED RESOURCES

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