

A Study of Euphemisms in the English Dialogues of the Movie *The Farewell* from the Perspective of Communicative Context of Adaptation Theory

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Abstract

With Jef Verschueren's adaptation theory serving as the guiding framework, this paper undertakes an analysis of the euphemisms in the movie *The Farewell*, which are found adapted to the communicative context of physical world, mental world, and social world. The purpose of this paper is to unveil the notion that communication represents an ongoing process of making choices, and the essence of euphemisms is the language choices made by the communicative parties according to the needs of different linguistic functions as well as the result of adaptation to the communicative context. This paper promotes the study of euphemisms in cross-cultural communication, aiming at increasing mutual understanding and respect.

Keywords

Adaptation theory; Communicative context; Euphemism; *The Farewell*

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The term "euphemism" originates from Greek, and it employs a vague language to substitute unpleasant or disrespectful expressions, thereby making people feel more content during conversations. It is obvious that euphemism is not merely a linguistic phenomenon, but also a reflection of culture and society.

The Farewell, a movie released in 2019, has received immense acclaim from worldwide audiences. This particular movie delves into the nuances of daily existence, bringing to light the contrasting facts between

China and America, through a perspective that remains remarkably uncharted—the treatments of life and death, which are taboos in most countries, so there is no doubt that people will use euphemism to soften the degree of offence in this kind of interaction.

Originally, adaptation theory is a concept in biological evolution. Belgian linguist Jef Verschueren^[1] introduced it into the study of pragmatics as a new perspective, and explained the phenomena of language use from the following four aspects: contextual correlates of adaptability, structural objects of adaptability, dynamics of adaptability, and salience of adaptability. According

to Jef Verschueren, the use of language is the process by which language fulfills its function, or the process in which language users continuously choose linguistic means to achieve communicative intentions according to the needs of the communicative context. Adaptation is reflected in the mutual adaptation between the context in which the language is used and the choice of linguistic structures.

This paper employs Verschueren's adaptation theory to study the euphemisms found in the movie *The Farewell*, which aims to provide a scientific explanation of euphemisms from a dynamic perspective, offer a fresh appreciation angle for the movie, and improve cross-cultural communication and understanding.

1.2. Literature review

Current research on euphemisms mainly focuses on semantics, pragmatics, and psychology. For example, Burrige^[2] suggested that euphemisms not only serve the purpose of politeness, but they also have a significant impact on language change. Li^[3] argued that the usage of English euphemism is founded on pragmatic principles and explores the semantic properties, use situations, and communicative objectives of English euphemism. Tang^[4] put forward the mechanism of euphemism generation and pointed out that individual cognitive, emotional, and social factors all play an important role in the process of euphemism generation.

The movie *The Farewell* is a typical one that focuses on the cultural differences between China and America. Most domestic and overseas studies are conducted from the perspective of cultural conflicts or cross-cultural communication, such as Liang^[5], Ren^[6], and Nuandini and Kustantinah^[7].

The adaptation theory is used to analyze various fields such as English teaching, translation, and public speech. Wu and Wang^[8] discussed various strategies for effectively applying contextual adaptation theory to English teaching. He^[9] examined how to employ the contextual adaptation theory in the process of foreign affairs interpretation. According to him, interpreters must make the appropriate adaptations in accordance with the demands of the context in order to ensure the correctness and fluency of their interpretations. Obiajulu^[10] indicated that Bush used specific language strategies in his

messaging during the COVID-19 pandemic, adapted to the linguistic context to ensure that his messaging would communicate effectively with his target audience.

In summary, various scholars have explored euphemism from the perspective of semantics, pragmatics, and psychology; most research on *The Farewell* is conducted from the perspective of cross-cultural communication. Few studies focus on the analysis of the euphemisms in *The Farewell* from the perspective of Adaptation theory, which renders the current thesis necessary.

2. Analysis of euphemisms in The Farewell from the perspective of the communicative context of adaptation theory

2.1. Adaptation to mental world

The mental world is intricately linked to the utterer's mental activities. As we understand, an utterance entails a mutual decision-making process involving the utterer and the interpreter, and the utterer's personality, motivation, and emotion all influence the selection of language. Consequently, the following part will examine a few examples where adaptation to the mental world is demonstrated.

Example 1: -Hai Yan: So one day the wife goes out of town.

And when she returns the husband says honey,
The cat is dead.

And she says how can you tell me so abruptly like this.

You have to ease me into bad news
Like honey, the cat, he got on the roof.

So a few months later, the wife goes out of town again.

And she returns and the husband greets her again.
But this time he learned his lesson.

And as the wife comes through the door,
He says, honey your mom, she got on the roof.

The utterance was a joke that Hai Yan shared during a meal. When the husband informed his wife of the cat's passing, she found it too blunt. Later, when the wife's mother passed away, the husband softened the news by saying she "got on the roof," a euphemism for death. This

phrase was used to create a lighter mood and ease the wife's grief, as her mother held significant importance in her life. This joke told by Hai Yan was later used in the movie, where Hai Yan told Billi that her grandmother was dying, and Billi immediately asked, "How could you let me find out like this?" Hai Yan said, "How should I have told you? Oh, your grandmother's on the roof?" Regardless of whether someone is educated in China or the United States, they all have the same taboo about death. "Get on the roof" reflects the utterer's intention to alleviate offense and sadness, even though the speaker is also sad, using the phrase "get on the roof" to alleviate the sadness.

Example 2: -Nai Nai: You're still young, child
As you get older

It's good for you to have someone to take care of you.

-Billi: Does Mr. Li take care of you?

-Nai Nai: It's also good to be independent.

A woman should be self-sufficient.

The background of this conversation is that her grandmother is urging Billi to quickly find someone to marry. Billi says she is fine being alone right now. The grandmother believes having someone to take care of Billi is good, but then Billi asks her grandmother if Grandfather Li takes care of her well. The grandmother knows very well that Grandfather Li cannot even take care of himself, let alone take care of her. The grandmother quickly changes her tune and says it's also good for women to be independent. The character of Billi in this movie is not focused on material things like money. Instead, she has a different pursuit: to become a famous writer. Billi is portrayed as a careless, sunny, and cheerful individual who is willing to show her true self, and she loves her grandmother very much. This dialogue is humorous and interesting, and fully showcases Billi's personality. By using "Does Mr. Li take care of you?" in a humorous and tactful way, Billi responds to grandmother's pressure to get married. This also shows the adaptation to the humorous personality of Billi, which is included in the mental world.

2.2. Adaptation to physical world

Compared to adapting to other contexts, adapting to the physical world is a bit more difficult, because the

physical world requires specific time frames or specific spaces; otherwise, some languages might make no sense or be inexplicable. This requires people to have a full understanding of the context and background of the conversation.

Example 3: -Nai Nai: When the time comes just spread my ashes into the ocean.

No one's ever home anyway.

The background of this sentence is the family sweeping a grave to pay homage to their grandfather. The grandmother had a unique idea that she wanted a sea burial after she passed away. With everyone present, although the word "death" was not explicitly mentioned by the grandmother, she knew that everyone in the cemetery understood the meaning behind her words. Grandmother made a choice in her wording, using "when the time comes" instead of "death," and everyone in the cemetery adapted to the physical environment, understanding the underlying meaning when the grandmother softly said those words. "When the time comes" also reflects people's taboo on death, as they generally do not mention it in their daily lives. The reason why "when the time comes" adapts to the physical world is that both the utterer and interpreter make choices about the use of discourse under the special relative position that is, the tomb. The material conditions of speech are also a key factor in the physical world, which has a significant impact on the language choices for euphemisms.

2.3. Adaptation to social world

Individuals live in societies where the ideology largely influences their way of thinking. Consequently, people must consider several social factors when making language choices to ensure they align with social expectations. The following examples will analyze euphemisms that adapt to the social world.

Example 4: -Nai Nai: Do you have a friend yet?

-Billi: I have a lot of friends, Nai Nai.

-Nai Nai: I mean a special friend

You're all alone. I worry about you.

The grandmother has long been accustomed to the customs of the older generation, which include certain cultural norms and social expectations, especially when it comes to women. However, the grandmother wanted to learn more about her granddaughter's romantic situation,

a topic that can be sensitive and delicate to bring up. Knowing that asking directly about marriage or emotional status could be considered offensive and impolite in any cultural background, the grandmother decided to approach the topic with caution. She opted to use the euphemism “special friend” to refer to her granddaughter’s boyfriend, a term that is more subtle and respectful. By choosing this more subtle terminology, the grandmother aimed to reduce any potential discomfort her granddaughter, who may feel and show respect for her personal privacy. This approach also aligns with social expectations of modesty for women, further illustrating grandmother’s adaptation to societal norms. This conversation reflects the complexities of navigating gender and social expectations in the social world, highlighting the importance of approaching delicate topics with sensitivity and thoughtfulness.

Example 5: -Nai Nai: I have to yell at her just to hug him or

put her cheek against his!

Makes me wonder what they do in the bedroom,
when I’m not here.

This conversation takes place as Hao Hao, the grandmother’s grandson, and his Japanese wife take wedding photos. Hao Hao’s wife embodies the implicit characteristics of Japanese women in the movie, causing the grandmother to perceive her as emotionless. As a result, the grandmother feels the need to provide guidance on the intimate actions between the husband and wife. The grandmother’s comment to Billi, “Makes me wonder what they do in the bedroom when I’m not here,” euphemistically refers to the intimacy and even sexual behavior between the couple. Regardless of cultural background, the concept of sex is often associated with the bedroom. Both the Eastern culture, which is known for its reserved nature, and the Western culture, which is considered more open and liberal, share the belief that the topic of “sex” should not be openly discussed in public. While attitudes towards sexuality have become more progressive in recent times, it is still generally considered inappropriate to discuss explicit sexual topics in public settings. This social norm is rooted in the idea that such discussions may be offensive or inappropriate for others present, and people tend to be shy when discussing sex in everyday life, leading them to use euphemisms to

indirectly address the topic. By using the phrase “what they do in the bedroom,” the grandmother ensures that everyone understands the implied meaning, avoiding any potential embarrassment from a lack of understanding. This statement reflects the adaptation to social norms within the social world.

3. Conclusion

The major findings of this study can be summarized into the following two points.

First, euphemisms adjust flexibly to various aspects in the context of communication, while the social world greatly affects the process of choice-making. Prior to selecting their words, individuals thoroughly consider social norms and their connection with society. The movie *The Farewell*, used as an example in this paper, portrays individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds in culture shock. Billi, who received her education in the United States, tends to speak in a straightforward manner, while her grandmother, who has lived in China, tends to use implicit language. This discrepancy in language preferences is a reflection of adapting to different cultural norms in the social world, influenced by their respective cultural backgrounds.

Second, euphemisms are utilized by individuals to serve specific pragmatic purposes. This study delves into the significant pragmatic function of euphemisms by examining the different roles they play in the actions of the characters in *The Farewell*. These roles encompass reducing potential offense, creating a more comfortable atmosphere, adhering to societal gender expectations, and alleviating the gravity of language. By incorporating euphemisms, interactions become more seamless, and strangers are able to uphold a mutual sense of respect.

The limitations and suggestions for further research are as follows:

First, this paper solely focuses on the communicative context of adaptation theory to analyze euphemism in the movie *The Farewell*. Second, this paper solely examines how the characters in the movie make language choices based on the communicative context. Therefore, here are a few suggestions for further research. Researchers should embrace a dynamic approach to their study, as language is not static or unchanging. They should also expand their

use of the other four research angles in adaptation theory to conduct a more thorough examination of the subject. Moreover, researchers need to gather a broader range of

data for analysis, ensuring that the types of data collected are diverse.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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