

## Analysis of Euphemism in Film Language and Lines from a Cognitive Perspective

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**Keywords:** Cognitive analysis, Film language, Lines, Euphemism

**Abstract:** Film language is refined and condensed by director and editors suitable for the audience to understand and communicate, as well as flexible application of rhetorical techniques. Euphemism as a role of lubricant adjusting interpersonal communication is popular among the audience when used in the dialogues of film language, and can satisfy the “courtesy principle” of Geoffrey Leech. Film language is greatly characterized with a certain degree of universality and popularity. Through cognitive analysis of euphemism in film language lines, we can better understand the effects of euphemism in the specific context of film, know more about foreign culture and promote cultural exchange.

### 1. Introduction

Film language as a special oral language after artistic processing mostly is for face-to-face verbal communication with distinctive colloquial and popular characteristics. The rhetorical device of euphemism has an obvious effect in the lines of film language. Colloquial communication in the film is a reflection of dynamic language existing in specific language environment or context. Therefore, to correctly understand the euphemism in the film language and lines, the analysis of the film context is particularly important. This paper mainly analyzes the euphemisms in the film language and lines from a cognitive perspective so as to promote the exchange and development of language and culture.

According to cognitive linguistics, other than finding the connection between words in the discourse, we perceive the world and encyclopedic knowledge and contextual framework in the interaction mode between the mind and text, dynamically analyze the phenomenon of coreference, the relationship between sentences, and even the whole text. In particular, to correctly understand lines in the film language, accurately understand the meaning of the language and some special rhetorical devices, such as euphemism, we must rely on the specific context of the film, even the whole film.

### 2. Cognitive Analysis of Euphemism in Film Language

#### 2.1 Definition of Euphemism

English euphemisms originated from Greek means “pleasant statement”. Most euphemisms are used as the substitution of taboos. Euphemism are defined differently, mainly stated as follows: Its definition by *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1995 edition) is: “a polite word or expression that you use another mild word to avoid shock or discomfort.” Euphemism replace unpleasant or unrespectable expression by saying in an implicit, pleasant, or ambiguous way (Deng Yanchang, Liu Runqing, 1988). Euphemism refers to expression that can replace unpleasant or less respectful wording by using tactful or implicit words Xu Peng, 1996). According to above definitions of euphemism, it is widely believed that people use some gentle, pleasant, auspicious and indirect words in language communication to replace some unpleasant and terrible, painful, ominous or rude words; euphemism is a special technique and rhetorical device developed in the course of language application.

## 2.2 Composition of Euphemism

The composition of English euphemism has certain characteristics: different kinds of composition methods, rich and colorful forms of expression, generally categorized into grammatical devices, rhetorical devices, various means of word formation. For example, clipping is to break off both ends for concealing. For instance, gents (=Gentlemen's Room), male toilet lav (= lavatory, toilet). The definition of euphemism shows its positive effect. Euphemism just like a rich and colorful treasury deeply rooted in various language environments is widely used by all levels of society. Euphemism is used almost by everyone more or less. Euphemism. American scholar Hugh Rawson once said, "Euphemism is so deeply implanted in our language that none of us (even those who praise themselves straightforward) can finish a day without using euphemism." Essentially, euphemism means to replace a real word with a mendacious word.

So how euphemism is used in film language? How can we understand them accurately? In view of this, we analyze euphemisms in the context of film with cognitive linguistic theories. What is context? In a narrow sense, context is the contextual environment of discourse during verbal communication, that is, previous and subsequent words. In a broad sense, contextual factors should also include the social cultural background of verbal communication, the relationship between communication participants, the occasions and purposes of communication, the respective psychological states of the communication parties in communication, and the unique national psychology, aesthetic values, religious beliefs, etc. (Ban Wentao, 1999). The context involved in this paper is the context in a broad sense. Actors' dialogues and monologues in the specific context of film (including the application of various rhetorical devices such as euphemism) are mainly used to reflect the main plot and express the main idea of film.

Postmodernism is an art, social culture and ideological trend that happened in the 1960s and prevailed in the 1970s and 1980s in Europe and the United States. Roughly emerging in the 1930s, it has terminated modern art at the beginning, torn modern art from the origin, and lingered in western art field like a ghost. Promoted and influenced by the post-modernism thoughts, postmodern art has following characteristics: first, it criticizes rational thinking from a cognitive perspective; secondly, it opposes human-centered language expression mode from the perspective of language expression. In other words, to get rid of verbal control and complete the conversion of the art "I speak the language" to the "the language expresses my ideas", post-modern art strives to find symbols and codes of language expression, which is vivid reflected the film "Forrest Gump". By using collage techniques in the image modeling and narration, the film has created a playful and irony effect. Through falsification without a trace by high-tech means, this film turns American history of several decades after war into a personal growth diary of Forrest Gump. The foolish image of Forrest Gump subverts the image of hero in normal world. His behaviors often look occasional and subconscious due to his paranoia and simplicity, which clear up the causal relationship of people's daily habits. Due to the contingency, it not only subverts familiar causal concept, but also creates an unexpected comedy effect, liberating human history deeply rooted in people's minds from stereotyped cognition into a presumed fable easy to be remembered by people, and thus creating a fun of film-watching after revealing the lie.

When Forrest Gump recalled Jenny when he was young, he said to himself. *Now, remember how I told you that Jenny never seemed to want to go home? Well, she lived in a house that was as old as Alabama. Her mama had gone up to heaven when she was five and daddy was some kind of a farmer.*

Forrest Gump and Jenny were very good friends since childhood. With the change of time, Forrest Gump has never stopped "running" with his fighting will in his life and never changed his love for Jenny. When recalling the childhood of Jenny, instead of directly using the word die to say that Jenny had lost her mother at the age of five, Forrest Gump replaced "death" with the implicit and euphemistic wording "go up to heaven", which reflected that Forrest Gump missed Jenny and cared for Jenny.

In another context of the film "Forrest Gump", "When Forrest Gump returned to his home after running across the continental USA four times, he received a letter from his lover Jenny, and went to

see her, but unexpectedly found that Jenny had become a mother; Jenny introduced, “His name is Forrest.” Forrest Gump asked surprisingly, “A name like me?” Jenny did not directly answer, and explained euphemistically, “A name after his father.” Forrest asked then, “He has a daddy named Forrest too?”

In these conversations, some sentences which may seem not complete, even not standard, do not affect communication, and seem very natural and friendly. The dialog between A-Gump and Jenny without all unnecessary words, is simple to the point. Therefore, we must combine the context to figure out the exact meaning of these words. Why would Forrest Gump say these implicative words to hurt Jenny? We can find out the reason by analyzing the specific context above and combining with the whole film. Forrest Gump was mentally retarded since childhood with IQ of 75. With no memory of his close sexual contact with Jenny, he could not understand Jenny's euphemistic words. Questions and answers like this make sense for Forrest Gump,.

In the film “Gladiator”, Maximus encountered Roman princess - his former lover outside the tent.

*Lucilla: What did my father want with you?*

*Maximus: To wish me well before I leave for home.*

*Lucilla: You are lying. I could always tell when you were lying because you were never any good at it.*

*Maximus: I never acquired your comfort with it.*

*Lucilla: True. But then you never had to. Life is simpler for a soldier. Or do you think me heartless?*

*Maximus: I think you have a talent for survival.*

How should we understand the last sentence accurately? Considering the whole film, combining this context, these words answered the Lucilla's question, “Do you think I am ungrateful?” Generally speaking, it is correct to say yes or no. But Maximus broke the convention deliberately and used euphemism, that is, not answering that Lucilla is ungrateful. But only cruel people in such cruel world can survive. Cruelty is a gift to adapt and to survive. This sentence seems commendatory but expresses Maximus's dissatisfaction with Lucilla's behavior. Considering her identity as a princess and their previous love, he wanted to keep distance from her implicitly without being too explicit. So, this sentence should be interpreted as “I think you have the gift to survive”, which suits the context.

Prostitute originally referred to female musical artist, also known as “whore”, probably because they regard singing and dancing as a skill. “Harlot or whore” became a special term for women who sell their charms. A lot of euphemisms about prostitute can be found in film language as follows:

*Dr. Marsha: Ok, now think. Shouldn't your father be the judge of whether someone is right or wrong for him?*

*Jonah: He's not sane enough to judge anything. Now he's kissing her on the lips. She a ho. My dad has been captured by a ho. What am I going to do? (Sleepless in Seattle)*

This is a dialogue between Dr. Marsha and Jonah in the movie “Sleepless in Seattle”. If we analyze the entire storyline of the film, we know that Jonah's father Sam takes care of him as a single parent after Jonah's mother died. So, Jonah hopes to help his father find another wife through a program of the radio “You and Your Emotions” (Dr. Marsha is the host of the column), indicating that Jonah at the age of 8 thinks like an adult and cares about his father's emotional life. When Sam brought Victoria home, Jonah felt extremely dissatisfied with her, and poured out to the host of Dr. Marsha, program “You and Your Emotions”. What is certain is that a lot of people are listening to the program at the time. Therefore, Jonah replaced “Whore” (a cheap prostitute, ho is the abbreviation of “Whore”) with ho rather than speaking directly. This is an euphemistic way making people feel more acceptable.

Let's take a look at the euphemism in the film “Legally Blonde”.

*Elle: What's the point in staying, Paulette? I mean all people see when they look at me is blond hair and boobs. No one's ever gonna take me seriously. The people at law school don't. ...*

*Paulette: No, you're not a joke.*

It is known to all that people should try to consider others' feelings and mindset in social interaction to avoid causing unnecessary embarrassment. People, especially women, often express by

using euphemistic words out of sense of shame for certain parts of their bodies or certain functions of the human body. By analyzing this context, we know this conversation happened at the beauty shop of his friend Paulette after being insulted by her teacher. Even in such an angry situation, Elle paid attention to her words and deeds, used euphemism boobs instead of breast, as she is a student at Harvard Law School.

### **3. Summary**

Film as an important part of culture is the mirror and depiction of people's real life in refined and condensed language. In film language, words don't convey all its connotation between two sides. For example, they may use euphemism, so that the other person can consider and understand the "implication". To understand the euphemism in film language, it is necessary analyze the words in the specific context of the film by virtue of context, thus helping us better understand the effect of euphemism in the specific context of film.

### **Acknowledgement**

This research was financially supported by the Social Science Research Project of Education Department of Shaanxi Province of Comparative Study of English and Chinese Euphemism Pragmatics in Cross-cultural Communication (Grant NO. 2013JK0354).

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