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A Euphemistic Perspective to Death Expressions in Arabic Poetry with Reference to English

A B S T R A C T

The current study deals with the theoretical part of the English euphemisms and their Arabic equivalents. Death euphemism is an area that should be considered for its importance and may due to the fact that the original words might offend, disturb, or embarrass the addressee. The current study hypothesizes that death euphemism is a typical and common cultural phenomenon in both English and Arabic. The study aims at investigating the euphemistic death expressions and words as well as showing the reasons behind using such expressions. Practically, some selected related examples of both English and Arabic have been tackled. Finally, it can be concluded that death euphemism is a universal phenomenon.

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تعبير التلطف للفظ الموت في الشعر العربي ومقارنتها باللغة الانكليزية.
م. م آلاء صلاح الدين عزيز / كلية التربية للبنات / جامعة الموصل
الخلاصة:

تتحرى الدراسة الحالية دراسة تعابير التلطف المستخدمة في اللغتين العربية والانكليزية عند تناول الحديث لمواضيع محددة يصعب الحديث عنها (موضوع الموت أنموذجا) وذلك لان التعابير المستخدمة قد تؤذي مشاعر الشخص المخاطب أو تسيء إليه أو تسبب له الإحراج. وتفترض الدراسة إن أسلوب التلطف في التعبير عن الموت هو ظاهرة عامة في كلتا اللغتين العربية والانكليزية. أما الهدف من الدراسة فهو بيان التعابير التلطفية المستخدمة للتعبير عن الموت وبيان أسباب استخدامها. كما يتضمن الجانب العملي عرض مجموعة من الأمثلة التي تقود البحث إلى خلاصة مفادها أن أسلوب التلطف هو ظاهرة عالمية وهذا ما يؤكد الفرضية الموضوعية.

1. Introduction: Definitions of Euphemism, its Uses and Techniques

Commonly known that when people talk about those unhappy or embarrassing things or when they want to avoid bad omens, they use what is called euphemism. Crystal (1987:8) defines euphemism as "a word or phrase that is used in place of a disagreeable or offensive word or phrase". Hudson (2000:261) defines it as: "the extension of ordinary words and phrases to express unpleasant or embarrassing ideas". The unpleasantness of the meaning is diminished via the indirectness of form .Stockwell (2002:30) points out that euphemism is not a matter of lexical replacement of dissimilar words or phrases (a metonym rather than a metaphor), rather it conveys a difference and pleasant associations than other possibilities. , However, euphemism, in any language, is in a continual change that occurs from one generation to another due to the native speakers mood and age (Wilson, 1993: 65). Differently, Palmer (1993: 9) justifies this rapid change due to some reasons like the taboo terms or actions. He adds that what led to this fast change is taboo expressions where unpleasant things are replaced by. (ibid: 9-10). In the same context, Hughes (1991:13-15) points out that "the used euphemistic expressions tend to acquire the negative meaning of whatever they refer to and become contaminated and cumbersome. So, new ones are then sought."

Concerning the purpose of euphemism, certain points have been identified by Alkire (2002:1) just as follows:

- a) "To avoid speaking directly about something one fears."
- b) "To avoid speaking the truth; using double talk to hide one's real meaning."
- c) "To avoid naming a person or thing, using a synonym in order to appear innocent of slander."
- d) "To avoid naming something considered taboo (unacceptable, forbidden in polite society."
- e) "To avoid repeating the same name or idea, as a name-calling device in political or social issue debates".

- f) “To avoid revealing a secret or allowing others to overhear a name especially in spy novels and.”
- g) “To avoid too much seriousness and make light of a difficult situation.”

The points given above are to soften the reality of what we are communicating to a given listener or reader as well as to display good manners of speakers or writers.

Concerning euphemism, Veisbergs (2000:773-774) lists the following universal techniques:

- Loan words and phrases borrowed mainly from Latin and Greek which seem less offensive like *rebate (bribe)*, *senior (elderly)*, *sub-optimal (failed)*.
- Abbreviations : *WC (toilet)*, *KIA (killed in action)*, *big C (cancer)* which seem less dangerous or less impolite:
- Adaptations (distortions) – a specific word-formation pattern of euphemization: *cripes (Christ)*, *Gosh (good gracious)*.
- Truncation – deletion of some letters in writing .They letters deleted are substituted by asterisks or hyphens :*G- d (God)*.
- Widening of meaning – where a word (usually a semantically more general super-ordinate term) is found to include the meaning of the avoidable word ,i.e. complete substitution of denotative meaning: *growth (cancer)*, *relationship (affair)*, *assets (enemy targets)*, *manhood (penis)*.
- Metaphoric transfers: *blossom (pimple)*, *theatre of operations (battlefront)*.
- Ellipsis is used for euphemization as it transfers the meaning of the phrase onto another word: *ladies (ladies’ room)*, *action (military action)*, *remains (mortal remains)*.
- Use of negative:Negative prefixes are used to soften the effect of the word or to make it vague to an extent: *the underprivileged (the poor)*, *to disimprove (to make worse)*, *to deselect (to exclude)*.
- Longer periphrasis, Some lexemes gain semiaffix status: *differently abled (disabled)*, *visually impaired (blind)*, *physically different/ challenged (crippled)*.

2. The Hypothesis

In relation to this study, death euphemism is the area to be tackled that has common cultural grounds both in English and Arabic.

3. Aim of the study

The study aims at investigating the euphemized death words and phrases and showing the reasons behind them to an extent.

4. Death Euphemism

Death is an inevitable part of life. It happens to everyone at some point in time. Some people are afraid of uttering direct words or phrases related to death such as *undertaker*, *death certificate*, and *corpses*. Therefore, in all societies, people tend deliberately avoid using such expressions and replace them with more moderate ones. Soft words and expressions which provide a way to speak about death are used instead. Thus, expressions like *passed away* or *passed* or *departed* rather than *died* are used. *Deceased* is used as a euphemism for "*dead*". (Palmer,1972: 323)

4.1 Death Euphemism in English

As far as English language is concerned, death euphemistic expressions fall into the following set of categories (www3.2013:np):

- 1) Religious: words/phrases that are typically used to describe religious people who have died or words used by religious people to talk about someone who died:

“go to abode of peace, angels carried him away, answered God's calling, asleep in Christ, entered a better world, entered the great beyond, God took him, gone home, gone to a better life, gone to a better place, gone to eternal rest, gone to heaven, gone to the playground for the undead, in Abraham's bosom, in the great beyond, met his Maker, on the heavenly shores, on the other side, returned to dust, returned to his Maker, returned to his source, traded to the angels, transcended, with God now, with the ancestors, with the angels.”

2) Medical: words/phrases used by medical professionals:

“...at room temperature, bloodless, didn't make it, feeling no pain, his hour is come, left us, lost, lost vital signs, negative patient care outcome, out of his misery, pulled the plug, slipped away quickly.”

3) Burial: words/phrases that are used to describe someone who has been buried:

“...became a root inspector, biting the dust, checking out the grass from underneath, counting daisy roots, crow bait, food for worms, worm food, in the grave, in the horizontal phone booth, interred, laid to rest, picking turnips with a step ladder, pushing up daisies, six feet under, take an earth plot.”

4) Murder/Suicide: words/phrases used when someone was murdered or committed suicide:

“.... bumped off, cashed in, erased, fled from life, offed himself, put himself out of misery, reached the end of his rope, surrendered his life, surrendered to the ghost, whacked, was annihilated, was defused, was done in, was liquidated, was snuffed, was terminated, wearing cement shoes.”

5) Occupations: words/phrases used to describe the death of people in certain occupations:

“.....danced his last dance (dancer), dropped off the hook (butcher), gone off-line (computer programmer), reformatted (computer programmer), gone to the happy hunting ground (hunter), one last curtain call (actor), ran his last race (runner), sang his last song (singer), taken out of production (producer), that was all she wrote (author), wrote his final chapter (author), took the last count (boxer)”.

6) Humor: words/phrases that are meant to be humorous:

“.....became living-challenged, gone to sleep city, gone to take his

free kick at Hitler's backside, got stamped "return to sender",

7) General (Miscellaneous): words/phrases that are more commonly used or do not fit into the other categories:

“.....biting the biscuit, bought the farm, breathed the last breath, came to an end, ceased to be, dearly departed, deceased, expired, faded away, followed the light, game over, gone west, in the bone yard, in the crisper, joined the majority, kicked the bucket, laid down their burden, left a vacant chair, left the building, lifeless, no longer with us, no more, on a permanent vacation, passed, passed away, paying a debt, perished, resting in peace, sleeping with the fishes, taking an extended rest, using his one way ticket, etc.”.

4.2 Death Euphemism in Arabic

Arabic, just like English, has death euphemistic words and phrases. Arabic counterparts of death euphemism categories are as follows:

Religious:

"انتقل إلى الرفيق الأعلى، انتقل إلى رحمته تعالى، لبي نداء ربه، أسلم الروح، سلم أمانته، انتقل إلى الدار الآخرة، لقي وجه ربه، فاضت روحه إلى السماء، اختاره الله، في جنات الخلد، صعدت روحه إلى السماء، عادت روحه إلى بارئها، اسلم الروح إلى بارئها."

1- Medical

"لقد بذلنا كل ما في وسعنا (يستخدم الأطباء عادة للتخفيف من وطأة خبر الموت على ذوي المتوفى)"

2- Burial

"النعش، يوارى الثرى، مثواه الأخير، الجثمان، مراسم التشييع، موكب التشييع، إكليل الزهور، تحت التراب، نعيّة فاضل، الثوب الأبيض(الكفن) عاد إلى التراب،جثمانه الطاهر"

3- Murder/Suicide

" ، مصرع ، مقتل، لقي حتفه، دفع حياته في سبيل، انتحر ، الخ."

4- General (Miscellaneous):

"توفي، قضى، قضى نحبه، الوفاة، أتمته المنية، وافته المنية، لم يعد على قيد الحياة، وافاه الأجل، لقي حتفه، حلت نهايته، دنا اجله، غيبته المنية، جاء يومه، جاءت ساعته، اتته الساعة، الردى، كلنا

على هذا الطريق، لحق بأجداده، عمره قصير، لفظ الروح ، المأسوف على شبابه، محمولا على الأكتاف، فارق الحياة، فارتقت روحه الجسد، ترحل عن جواد الموسيقى، أفل نجمه، الخ."

Al-Thalibi (died in 1038:105,122,170) points out three classifications of euphemistic expressions depending on the status of the dead person to the speaker:

1- Euphemism expressions for dear people, relatives and political figures:

"انقضت أيامه ، استأثر الله به، انتقل إلى جوار ربه، انقلب إلى كرامة الله وعفوه، خانه عمره، لم تسمح النوائب بالتجافي عن مهجته، أجاب داعي ربه، نفذ قضاء الله فيه، لحق بالسبيل التي لا احتراز منها ولا مجاز عنها، قبضه الله إليه، أسعده الله بجواره، دعاه الله فأجاب دعاءه ولبى ندائه، نقله الله إلى دار رضوانه ومحل غفرانه، ناداه الله فلباه وفارق دنياه."

2- Euphemism expressions for writers and men of letters:

"نجم من نجوم العلم هوى وغصن من أغصان الأدب ذوى، قد عادت لفراقه الآداب أشعثا ووجوه الفضل غيرا، شابت بعده لمم الأقلام وجفت غرر الكلام، قامت نوادب الأدب وتعطلت حوالي الكتب."

3- Euphemism expressions for enemies:

"أفضى به سوء العاقبة إلى العذاب الأليم والمال الذميم وسكنى الجحيم، قضى نحبه ولقي بأسود صحيفة ربه، جراحه أتت على نفسه ووسدته في رسمه."

5. Death Euphemism in Arabic Poetry

Pre-Islam and Post- Islam Arabic poetry witnessed a lot of death euphemism. Arabic poetic heritage involves a lot of euphemistic expressions. Familiarly, Arabs are used to use polite, indirect, and implicit expressions whenever they talk about death. They associated demise with glory, pride and courage when specific persons were killed or martyred, or with senses of patience and satisfaction with Allah's Preordainment. They eulogized the merits of the deceased and praised them rightly if naturally died. Jawahir Al balagha were chosen with selective background information about bereaved people whose loved ones had deceased but they showed patience. Given wisdom and decisive

speech, Arabs have known how to mitigate politely grief by using splendid statements and eloquent expressions. "A Bedouin was asked: What is your finest poetry? He answered: Elegies for our parents and children, because we say them while our hearts are burning.", Al-Jahiz, A (d. 255). print (1968: 371).

The following examples really express Arabic elegiac poetry , these samples are selected from two periods : pre – Islam and after- Islam . Both periods use theoretic devises frequently :

Al-Khansaa (Poetess):

"يا عَيْنِ ما لَكَ لا تُبْكِينَ تُسْكابا"
"إِذا رابَ دَهْرٌ وَكانَ الدَّهْرُ رِياَبا"
"فإِبكي أَخاكِ لِأَيْتامٍ وَأرْمَلَةٍ"
"وَإِبكي أَخاكِ إِذا جاوَرَتِ أَجْنابا"

"Oh my eyes why do you not flood with tears"
"As time harms and when time instills fears"
"Cry over your brother for a widow and orphans"
*"Mourn your brother if you neighbor strangers"**

The technique used here is borrowing, Al-Khansaa sheds tears .She incites her eyes not to stop weeping .She is agitated and dejected and her grief increases with the aggravation and exacerbation of her psychology. For her, crying is a kind of faithfulness to her brother after she was bereaved by his death. Al-Khansaa composes gem poems about the great loss and disaster that befell her as the leading great knight and home protector.

(Tajalliyat fee Shi'ri al-Khansa/ Dalloom Muhammad)

* The lines are translated by the researcher

[http:// www.startimes.com/f.aspx?t=16390669](http://www.startimes.com/f.aspx?t=16390669)

al-Bustani, , 1996 p 5.

Ahmad Shawqi Lamenting Saad Zaghoul:

"وانحنى الشرق عليها فبكاها شيعوا الشمس ومالوا بضحاها"

"They escorted the sun for burial and leaned its forenoon"

"And the orient bent over it to mourn the mate of moon"

The technique used here is metaphoric, the poet compared the deceased to sun that humans do not dispense with in this life as if the mourners carried the sun on their shoulders the way the dead is taken for burial. He portrays then how they lowered the body into the grave as though they slanted the forenoon to hide it in the ground. In the second line of the verse, he tells that the East (i.e. Arabs) bowed with grief over the departed to bewail him.

"ليتني في الركب لما أفلت ... يوشع همت فنادى فثناها"

"Had I been with the procession when Joshua"

"called it back after its setting was soon"

The poet wished he was like Joshua, peace be upon him, so that Allah would answer his prayers and delay the death of the late person whom he likened to the sun.

It is noteworthy that Joshua (Moses' companion and his successor, peace be upon them) led the Children of Israel to enter the Holy Land. He ordered the sun to stop and wait after it was about to go down and Allah, Most High, answered his supplication; he conquered the land and triumphed over his enemies. Hence, the poet can wish what s/he will . Shawqi's Diva

Hassan bin Thabit Lamenting Hamza and Martyrs of Uhud:

"فلا تذكروا قتلى وحمزة فيهم... قتيل ثوى لله وهو مطيع"

"Do not mention the fallen and Hamza is of them"

"He fell for Allah's sake and Obeyed Him"

That is, do not bewail the slain warriors of Uhud as Hamza was among them (May Allah be pleased with them) who all answered Allah's Call and obeyed

Him.

"فإن جنان الخلد منزلة له ... وأمر الذي يقضي الأمور سريع"

"The gardens of immortality are his abode ... "

"And the Command of Him Who Judges matters is swift"

Allah honoured them with Paradise and gave them the glad tidings of that; Allah's command is fast with no delay. Congratulations on the Paradise!

Islamic Research Journal v. 11, p. 300.

Sharif Abu Isaac Ass-Sabii:

"أعلمت من حملوا على الأعواد؟ رأيت كيف خبا ضياء النادي؟"

"Did you know who on the wooden stretcher was carried?"

"Did you see how the light council waned?"

The poet shrouds his question in agony and outward regret as he says: Do you know this man who was taken in the coffin? Did you see how the lights of the assembly faded? He attributed that to his great friend's death, as if he wanted to teach us that the dead was like moon lighting up the place with his briskness and unique personality and when lost, the light gradually vanished until it was wholly dark. Al-Manar Magazine, At-Taassub Section, v. 1, p. 504.

Ibn Ar-Roumi lamenting his middle son:

"بكاؤكما يشفي وإن كان لا يجدي ** فجودا فقد أودى نظيركما عندي"

"The cry of you both soothes although it is fruitless"

"Sacrifice, for your esteemed peer has become lifeless"

He addresses his two remaining sons and says to them that their cry gratifies him, but it is useless as it does not bring back their brother. Later he says (فجودا) sacrifice) which is a pun because being 'generous' with tears is pointless as he told them; thus, he asked them to give themselves up (i.e. die). Likewise, (أودى) perished) means that their dearer brother expired.

"ألا قاتل الله المنايا ورميها ** من القوم حبات القلوب على عمدي"

"May Allah End decease and its arrows shot"

“From the folk deliberately at the heart fruits”

The exhortation particle *ألا* in Arabic is used for blaming and reprimanding. The poet here blames demise and describes it as arrows that hit (*قَبَابَاتِ الْقُلُوبِ* heart fruits: Al-Muheet fee l-Lugha, v. 1, p. 160): on purpose. Ibn Ar-Roumi's Divan, v. 1, p. 1316. Ash-Shamila Website 11000.

Abu 'Abdir-Rahman Al-'Otby Lamenting His Son, Sulaiman:

"تَقَاضَاكَ دَهْرٌ فَاقْتَضَاكَ بِدِينِهِ ... وَلِلدَّهْرِ فِي نَفْسِي عَلَيَّ دِيُونٌ"

“Time sued you and demanded from you the debt”

“And to time in my mind I owe many a debt”

The poet avoids calling it death, which is a harsh name. So, he came with a new image that shows time as a contestant from whom he claims a lot of debts, including the deceased. Ultimately, he gets the ruling that he should return it to time accordingly.

"دَفَنْتُ بِكَفِّي بَعْضَ نَفْسِي فَأَصْبَحْتُ ... لَهَا دَافِقٌ مِنْ نَفْسِهَا وَدَفِينٌ"

“I buried with my palm some of myself”

“So it has had a burier and grown buried itself”

In this magnificent verse, the poet says that by burying his companion he buried some of himself, therefore he wonders how he buries and being buried at the same time. Zainab Bint Att-Ttathriya v. 1, p. 192.

At-Ta'azi wa l-Mawa'idh, v. 1, p. 192.

Zainab Bint Att-Ttathriya/Encyclopaedia of Arabic Poetry

"وَكَنتِ أَعْيُرُ الدَّمْعَ قَبْلَكَ مَنْ بَكَى وَأَنْتِ عَلَى مَنْ مَاتَ بَعْدَكَ شَاغِلَةٌ"

“Before you I would lend tears to anyone cries”

“But you diverted after you crying over any other who dies”

Zainab says that she used to lend her tears to anyone who needs them but the beloved's departure distracted her from other people and she has devoted her crying to him alone.

6. Conclusion:

The research shows that euphemism is a common norm in all societies. Its appearance has different motives: superstition, sympathy, and politeness. Death euphemisms means avoiding the unpleasantness and embarrassing death words and expressions by replacing them with more moderate ones. A great number of expressions used as euphemisms daily. People should be aware of them. Since different techniques are available to express euphemism, a speaker or a writer has that kind of varieties which enable him to choose easily. However, English uses death euphemisms more frequently than Arabic does. In the same context, it is noticed that no occupation or humor euphemized expressions for death are found in Arabic.

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