

A Pragmatic Analysis of the Use of Euphemisms from the Perspective of Politeness Principle: A Case Study of Modern Family Season 1

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Abstract: As an important linguistic and pragmatic means, euphemism helps maintain interpersonal harmony and communicative politeness in daily interaction. Based on Leech's Politeness Principle (PP), this paper explores the use of euphemisms in the first season of the American sitcom *Modern Family*, covering its six maxims: Tact, Generosity, Approbation, Modesty, Agreement, and Sympathy. This study adopts both qualitative and quantitative methods. Through sorting out 24 episodes, 154 valid euphemistic examples are identified. Quantitative results show that the Tact Maxim is the most frequently used, accounting for 59.74% of all cases, which highlights its core role in reducing face threats and ensuring smooth communication. This research reveals that euphemisms act as a flexible rhetorical strategy to balance self-expression and consideration for others. The findings enrich pragmatic studies on euphemisms and provide implications for English language teaching and cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: euphemisms; Politeness Principle; pragmatic analysis; *Modern Family*

DOI: 10.69979/3041-0843.26.02.010

1 Introduction

As a widespread linguistic phenomenon, euphemism is extensively used in daily communication to interpret unpleasant or sensitive concepts indirectly and tactfully, mitigating conflicts and enhancing social harmony (Li, 2003). Originating from avoidance mentality and taboos, euphemisms have unique features and significant communicative functions, with their use closely linked to pragmatics and Leech's Politeness Principle (Allan & Burridge, 1991; Shao, 2007). Proposed by Leech (1983), the Politeness Principle includes six maxims, serving as a key theoretical framework for euphemism research. As a popular American sitcom, *Modern Family* reflects real American family life, with its plot and comedic effect relying on character conversations that often employ euphemisms complying with the Politeness Principle (Tao, 2019; Chen, 2023).

To understand euphemism use and the Politeness Principle in specific contexts, this study takes conversations from *Modern Family* Season 1 as the corpus, adopting mixed qualitative and quantitative methods to examine euphemisms from the perspective of the Politeness Principle. This paper comprises six chapters: Chapter 1 introduces the research background, purpose and significance; Chapter 2 reviews domestic and western studies on euphemisms; Chapter 3 elaborates on Leech's Politeness Principle; Chapter 4 details the research design and data collection; Chapter 5 analyzes euphemisms qualitatively and quantitatively; Chapter 6 summarizes findings, discusses implications and proposes future research suggestions.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Western studies on euphemisms

Western scholars have conducted extensive research into euphemisms from semantic, pragmatic, and sociocultural perspectives. Neaman & Silver (1983) defined euphemisms as pleasant or less offensive alternatives to expressions that may cause discomfort, embarrassment, or threat. Allan & Burridge (1991) regarded euphemisms as linguistic shields that help speakers avoid negative connotations and maintain harmonious communication. In pragmatics, euphemistic indirectness was widely interpreted as a politeness strategy intended to reduce face threats (Leech, 1983; Brown & Levinson, 1987). Over recent decades, increasing attention has also been paid to authentic conversational data such as media discourse, enabling researchers to examine how euphemisms operate in real-life interactional contexts rather than in constructed examples.

2.2 Domestic studies on euphemisms

Chinese researchers have explored euphemisms in cross-cultural communication, translation, and pragmatic functioning. Guo (2000) identified politeness as one of the primary social functions of euphemisms. Qian & Fu (2005) stated that euphemisms conform to the requirements of the Politeness Principle by avoiding rudeness and maintaining rapport. In recent years, increasing research has focused on media corpora. Cao (2022) examined euphemisms in *Friends* under the Politeness Principle, and Chen (2023) analyzed politeness strategies in American sitcom dialogue. These studies have confirmed that sitcom language provides rich and natural data for investigating pragmatic phenomena in daily communication.

2.3 Limitation of the studies above

Although previous research has established a firm theoretical foundation, most studies focus on general description rather than systematic quantitative analysis. Few studies classify euphemisms against all six maxims of the Politeness Principle using natural conversational data. This study addresses the gap by conducting a focused mixed-methods case study of *Modern Family* Season 1.

3 Theoretical Framework

3.1 Cooperative Principle and its relation to Politeness Principle

Grice’s Cooperative Principle explains how speakers convey conversational implicature but cannot fully account for widespread indirectness in communication. Leech’s (1983) Politeness Principle provides a crucial supplement, as it reveals that speakers often violate the Cooperative Principle to preserve politeness and interpersonal harmony (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

3.2 Politeness Principle

Leech’s Politeness Principle aims to minimize impoliteness and sustain amicable relations. It includes six maxims:

1. Tact Maxim: Minimize cost to others; maximize benefit to others.
2. Generosity Maxim: Minimize benefit to self; maximize cost to self.
3. Approbation Maxim: Minimize dispraise of others; maximize praise of others.
4. Modesty Maxim: Minimize praise of self; maximize dispraise of self.
5. Agreement Maxim: Minimize disagreement; maximize agreement.
6. Sympathy Maxim: Minimize antipathy; maximize sympathy.

Table 1 Six Maxims in Leech’s Politeness Principle

Maxim	A	B
Tact Maxim	Minimize cost to other	Maximize benefit to other
Generosity Maxim	Minimize benefit to self	Maximize cost to self
Approbation Maxim	Minimize dispraise of other	Maximize praise of other
Modesty Maxim	Minimize praise of self	Maximize dispraise of self
Agreement Maxim	Minimize disagreement between self and other	Maximize agreement between self and other
Sympathy Maxim	Minimize antipathy between self and other	Maximize sympathy between self and other

4 Methodology

4.1 Research questions

How do characters in Modern Family season 1 observe the six maxims of Politeness Principle?

How are euphemisms employed in different contexts in accordance with each maxim?

Which maxim of Politeness Principle is most frequently followed and why?

4.2 Research design

4.2.1 Research materials

The corpus is the first season of Modern Family (2009-2010), which includes 24 episodes. The sitcom depicts diverse family interactions and sensitive topics, making it ideal for studying euphemism and politeness (Pi, 2022; Tao, 2019).

4.2.2 Research methods

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining qualitative and quantitative analysis to ensure the systematicness and rigor of the research. On the one hand, qualitative analysis is used to interpret the pragmatic functions of euphemistic expressions, explore how they meet the requirements of each maxim in the Politeness Principle, and explain their communicative effects in specific conversational contexts. On the other hand, quantitative analysis is carried out to calculate the frequency and percentage of euphemisms corresponding to each of the six maxims, so as to find out their distribution pattern and dominant usage characteristics. After careful identification, classification and verification, a total of 154 valid euphemistic instances that conform to the Politeness Principle were finally extracted, coded and included in the statistical and analytical process.

5 Results

5.1 Content analysis

5.1.1 Euphemisms observing the tact maxim

In Leech’s Politeness Principle, the Tact Maxim holds the primary position. It consists of two aspects: a negative aspect, which is to “minimize the cost to other,” and a positive aspect, which is to “maximize the benefit to other.” The positive aspect is less significant but naturally follows from the negative aspect. When combined with the use of euphemisms in real-life conversations, the Tact Maxim is adhered to in a variety of situations.

Example 1:

Phil: So, any chance I could, uh, get a break on this one?

-Season 1, Episode 2

In Example 1, Phil mistakenly believes that his son Luke has left his new bicycle unattended on the roadside. To teach Luke a lesson about responsibility, Phil decides to pretend to steal the bike. However, he accidentally takes another child’s bike instead of Luke’s, which is actually parked safely in the garage at home. Not only does Phil take the wrong bike, but he also loses it. To make up for his mistake, he

hurries to the bike shop to buy a new one. Unfortunately, having just bought a bike for Luke, he is now short on funds. To avoid a direct request for a discount, he asks the shop assistant in a euphemistic way: “So, any chance I could, uh, get a break on this one?” His use of “could” and “any chance” reflects his cautious and tactful approach, which, given the context, is quite amusing.

5.1.2 Euphemisms observing the generosity maxim

Unlike the “other-centered” Maxim of Tact, the Generosity Maxim is “self-centered,” characterized by two aspects: “minimize benefit to self” and “maximize cost to self.” When combined with euphemistic expressions in communication, adhering to the Generosity Maxim can be understood as an effort to provide as much beneficial content as possible for others (Cao, 2022).

Example 2:

Denise: You know, um, if it’s okay, I think I’m just gonna use the, um.

Claire: Oh, yeah. Of course. Down the hall.

-Season 1, Episode 17

In Example 2, Phil’s ex-girlfriend Denise comes to visit the family. While chatting, Denise feels the need to use the bathroom. However, to show politeness and avoid the rudeness of abruptly asking to use the bathroom in the host’s house, she uses expressions such as “if it’s okay” and “I’m just” to carefully imply her request. This is a typical example of following the Generosity Maxim, it can be understood as a language strategy where the speaker downplays their own needs to avoid imposing on the listener. By using “if it’s okay,” Denise seeks permission from the host, while “just” softens the impact of her request.

5.1.3 Euphemisms observing the approbation maxim

The Approbation Maxim is characterized by two distinct aspects: a negative aspect and a positive aspect. The negative aspect involves minimizing dispraise of others, while the positive aspect focuses on maximizing praise of others. Within this maxim, the negative aspect enjoys priority over the positive one. Essentially, it means prioritizing the avoidance of saying unpleasant things about others (Leech, 1983). This is why most euphemisms are closely related to the negative aspect.

Example 3:

Manny: Jay shocked himself twice.

Jay: Okay, Manny.

Manny: Well, I warned him.

Jay: Yep, he’s been a big help (sarcastic).

-Season 1, Episode 2

In Example 3, Manny and Jay are working together to fix the fan in Manny’s room. In reality, Manny is just watching the instructions while Jay does the actual work. When Gloria comes upstairs to check on them, Manny makes fun of Jay by saying that he has shocked himself twice. Jay is embarrassed and unhappy that Manny isn’t contributing anything. Manny then says that he warned Jay, which only adds to Jay’s frustration. Jay doesn’t want to openly criticize Manny in front of his mother, so he uses sarcasm, saying, “Yep, he’s been a big help,” even though Manny hasn’t actually helped at all.

5.1.4 Euphemisms observing the modesty maxim

Contrary to the Approbation Maxim, the Modesty Maxim has shifted the focus back to “self.” The two aspects of the Modesty Maxim are “minimize praise of self” and “maximize dispraise of self”. In *Modern Family*, the euphemistic strategies complying with the Modesty Maxim has brought unexpected humorous outcome.

Example 4:

Cameron: When we first met, he wouldn’t even look at me, because I was a hick from the farm in Missouri, and he’s a big city mouse.

Mitchell: Who says “City mouse?”

Cameron: Country mice.

-Season 1, Episode 3

In Example 4, Cameron is describing the initial interaction between himself and Mitchell. He suggests that Mitchell was dismissive of him because he comes from the countryside. Cameron doesn’t sharply point out the fact. Quite the opposite, he uses a roundabout way to abase himself first by calling himself a “hick”, a self-deprecating term that implies a lack of sophistication compared to city dwellers. Then he calls Mitchell a “big city mouse”, a humorous counterpoint to the familiar term “country mice”, which often carries a negative connotation for rural people. In this case, by referring Mitchell as “city mouse”, Cameron cleverly highlights Mitchell’s perceived arrogance in a playful yet pointed manner. This exchange not only reflects the cultural divide between rural and urban lifestyles but also showcases Cameron’s wit in addressing the situation without directly confronting Mitchell.

5.1.5 Euphemisms observing the agreement maxim

In contrast to the maxims mentioned above, the Agreement Maxim put emphasis on the harmonious relationship with other people. “There is a tendency to exaggerate agreement with other people, and to mitigate disagreement by expressing regret, partial agreement, etc. (Leech, 1983: 138).” In this way, the two respects of the Agreement Maxim are “minimize disagreement between self and other” and “maximize agreement between self and other.” When comes to situation where one follows this maxim, the real intention behind the use of euphemistic expressions is to hide one’s real thoughts.

Example 5:

Alex: Mom! Dad! Luke just shot me!

Luke: I didn't mean to.
 Alex: They're only plastic BBs, it was an accident.
 Claire: What did I tell you would happen if you got him a gun? Deal with this.
 Phil: Buddy, uncool.
 -Season1, Episode 1

In Example 5, Luke accidentally shot Alex with his plastic gun. Alex complains to Claire and Phil. Claire thinks that Luke's behavior is extremely inappropriate and potentially dangerous and that Luke needs to be disciplined, so she turns to Phil and wants him to deal with this because they have a deal if Luke shoots someone, Phil must shoot him back as a punishment. Despite the fact that they have a deal, Phil doesn't take this incident very seriously and finds that shooting Luke back as a punishment too harsh. But since he and Claire need to be united when it comes to educating their children, he says "uncool" as a tender criticism, in hope of easing the tension between Luke and Alex, and also between himself and Claire. This response subtly reflects his partial disagreement with the initial idea, showcasing his preference for a more lenient method of discipline.

5.1.6 Euphemisms observing the sympathy maxim

The Sympathy Maxim shares similarities with the Agreement Maxim, both emphasizing the importance of maintaining good interpersonal relations. However, the Sympathy Maxim focuses more on the emotional level. The two key principles are "minimize antipathy between self and other" and "maximize sympathy between self and other." In daily communication, the use of euphemisms often reflects the negative aspect of the Sympathy Maxim, which aims to avoid direct emotional confrontation. Example 12:

Jay: You know, Gloria, that little blowup with that other mom. Why do you have to do things like that?
 Gloria: If somebody says something about my family, I'm going to...
 Jay: I'm just saying. You could take it down here a little bit. That's all.
 Gloria: Oh, yeah. 'Cause that's where you live, down here. But I live up here!
 Jay: Yeah, but, you don't have to be emotional all the time. That's all I'm saying.
 -Season 1, Episode 1

In Example 6, during a soccer game, Manny makes a mistake that leads to his team conceding a goal. One of the other players' mothers tells the coach to take Manny off the field. Upon hearing this, Gloria immediately and fiercely defends her son by retorting against that mother. Jay, however, feels that Gloria's behavior is too aggressive and doesn't appreciate her tendency to stir up trouble. After the game, he wants to offer her some advice. To avoid revealing his aversion to her behavior and to prevent Gloria from getting upset and arguing with him, Jay uses phrases like "That's all I'm saying" and "That's it," which soften his tone. By doing so, he is able to present his suggestions in a gentler and acceptable manner. These softening phrases help to downplay the severity of the situation and avoid emotional confrontation between the two of them.

5.2 Data analysis

Table 2 The occurrences of euphemisms in Modern Family season 1

Category	Forms of euphemisms	Frequency	Number	Percentage
Tact Maxim	Expressing dissatisfaction tactfully	27	92	59.74%
	Avoiding hurtful language	17		
	Expressing requests or opinions tactfully	15		
	Politely declining others' suggestions	14		
	Sexual intercourse	9		
	Replacing swear words	3		
	Polite expressions for the toilet	3		
	Naming embarrassing behaviors	2		
	Polite expression of body parts	1		
Generosity Maxim	Expressing concern tactfully	1	2	1.29%
	Expressing willingness to use the restroom	1		
Approbation Maxim	Asking for pocket money	1	43	27.92%
	Evaluating others tactfully	36		
	Using ironic praise to avoid embarrassment	5		
Modesty Maxim	Using jokes to defuse awkwardness	2	3	1.94%
	Self-depreciation or self-mockery	3		
Agreement Maxim	Avoiding disagreements with others	6	6	3.89%
Sympathy Maxim	Avoiding emotional confrontation	8	8	5.19%
Total			154	100%

As shown in Table 2, the Tact Maxim is the most frequently observed, with 92 instances (59.74%), which strongly supports Leech's (1983) view that it constitutes the core of English politeness. Its high frequency stems from three key functions: minimizing imposition on others, handling diverse sensitive topics in daily family talk, and reducing face-threatening acts to sustain interpersonal harmony (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The Approbation Maxim ranks second with 43 cases (27.92%), indicating that avoiding direct criticism and protecting others' positive face is another major motivation for euphemism use. The Sympathy Maxim and Agreement Maxim account for 5.19% and 3.89% respectively, reflecting speakers' concern for emotional comfort and conversational smoothness. The Modesty Maxim and Generosity Maxim are less frequent (1.94% and 1.29%), as self-modesty and self-sacrifice are less emphasized in casual family interaction. Overall, the quantitative results confirm that euphemisms in Modern Family Season 1 mainly serve to reduce imposition, safeguard face, and avoid conflict, embodying the practical functions of the Politeness Principle in real-life communication.

6 Conclusion

This study analyzes 154 euphemistic instances extracted from the first season of Modern Family, with Leech's Politeness Principle as the analytical framework. The research findings show that the Tact Maxim appears most frequently, making up 59.74% of all cases, while the Approbation Maxim ranks second at 27.92%. This indicates that in daily communication, euphemisms are mainly used to reduce unnecessary imposition, protect the interlocutors' face, and avoid interpersonal conflicts. These results not only prove that the Politeness Principle is practically applicable to natural conversational data but also highlight that euphemisms, as effective pragmatic tools, have important strategic value in maintaining interpersonal harmony. For English language teaching, this study provides significant implications by emphasizing the necessity of cultivating learners' pragmatic competence and politeness awareness. For cross-cultural communication, it helps enhance people's understanding of indirect linguistic strategies. As for future research, it can expand the scope to cross-cultural or cross-genre comparisons, explore the sociocultural factors that influence the use of euphemisms, or conduct diachronic studies on the changing patterns of euphemistic expressions.

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