

Euphemizing Death in Arabic Poetry with Reference to English*

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Abstract

The current study deals with the theoretical part of English euphemisms and their Arabic equivalents which are employed when talking about certain subjects (death euphemism as a study case) that can be difficult to talk about, this may be due to the fact that the original words for these subjects might offend, disturb, or embarrass the addressee.

As in the practical part of the research, some selected Arabic verses are chosen to be analyzed. The current study hypothesizes that death euphemism is a typical and common cultural phenomenon in both English and Arabic.

The study aims at showing and investigating the euphemized expressions and words related to death, and giving the reasons for using these expressions. In the practical side of the study, some selected related examples of both English and Arabic are given. It is concluded that death euphemism is a universal phenomenon.

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تلطيف عبارات الموت في الشعر العربي مع الإشارة إلى اللغة الانكليزية*

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المستخلص

تتحرى الدراسة الحالية في الجانب النظري منها دراسة تعابير التلطف المستعملة في اللغة الانكليزية وما يناظرها في اللغة العربية عند تناول الحديث لمواضيع محددة يصعب الحديث عنها (موضوع الموت أنموذجاً) لأن التعابير المستعملة قد تؤذي مشاعر الشخص المخاطب أو تسيء إليه أو تسبب له الإحراج.

أما في الجانب العملي فقد اختار الباحث مجموعة من الأبيات الشعرية من تراث الشعر العربي وفي هذه الابيات المختارة نرى أن الشعراء قد أحسنوا في وصف الموت وذكره بأساليب ومفردات ملطّفة.

وتفترض الدراسة أن أسلوب التلطف في التعبير عن الموت هو ظاهرة عامة في كلتا اللغتين العربية والانكليزية.

أما الهدف من الدراسة فهو بيان التعابير التلطيفية المستعملة للتعبير عن الموت وبيان اسباب استعمالها. 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.

(*) تم استلام البحث في ٢٠١٣/٦/١، قُدمَ البحث في الندوة الأولى لقسم اللغة الانكليزية المنعقدة تحت عنوان (قضايا معاصرة في اللغة والأدب)، وحصل على قبول النشر في ٢٠١٣/١٢/١٦.

1. Introduction: Definitions of euphemism, its uses and techniques

Euphemism is a polite way used when people talk about those unhappy or embarrassing things or when they want to avoid bad omens. It is a common phenomenon in the process of human language using.

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 euphemism as: "the extension of ordinary words and phrases to express unpleasant or embarrassing ideas". The indirectness of form is felt to diminish the unpleasantness of the meaning.

Stockwell (2002: 30) says "euphemism can be seen not so much a lexical replacement by a dissimilar word as a replacement by a closely associated words (a metonym rather than a metaphor); the *rest room* is not a metaphor; rather it conveys slightly different, more pleasant associations than other possibilities". Euphemism, however, is in a continual change in any language. This change occurs from one generation to another due to the mood of the native speakers and the mood of the age (Wilson, 1993: 65).

Palmer (1993: 9) gives different reasons for such rapid change. One of these reasons is attributed to the taboo terms or actions. He says that "a cause of fast change is taboo- a word that is used for something unpleasant is replaced by another and that too is again replaced later" (ibid: 9-10).

In the same context , Hughes (1991: 13-15) states that after a certain period of use 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. There are certain purposes for using euphemism.

Alkire (2002: 1) summarizes these as "to soften the reality of what we are communicating to a given listener or reader". In addition to displaying good manners, speakers or writers use euphemism for other different reasons, they are: (www.1, 2013:1)

- 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 (frequently used in spy novels and movies)
- g) To avoid too much seriousness and make light of a difficult situation.

However, expressing euphemism involves using some techniques which are similar in most languages. Veisbergs (2000: 773-774) lists the following techniques for expressing euphemism:

- Loans borrowed mainly from Latin and Greek seems less offensive: they are more technical, sophisticated, and longer and sometimes the meaning is not immediately apparent: *rebate (bribe)*, *senior (elderly)*, *sub-optimal (failed)*.
- Abbreviations seem less dangerous or impolite: *WC (toilet)*, *KIA (killed in action)*, *big C (cancer)*.

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- Adaptations (distortions) – a specific word-formation pattern of euphemization: *cripes* (*Christ*), *gosh* (*good gracious*).
 - Truncation – deletion of some letters in writing is less widespread today as it used to be. Asterisks or hyphens are usually used: *G- d* (*God*).
 - Widening of meaning – a word (usually a semantically more general super-ordinate term) is found and its meaning is widened to include the meaning of the avoidable word. In extreme cases one finds the complete substitution of denotative meaning: *growth* (*cancer*), *relationship* (*affair*), *inmates*; *clients*; *residents* (*prisoners*), *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, which is not directly associated with the avoidable subject: *ladies* (*ladies' room*), *action* (*military action*), *remains* (*mortal remains*).
 - Use of negative. There is a distinct tendency in many languages to use negative prefixes for softening the effect of the word or making it extremely vague: *the underprivileged* (*the poor*), *to disimprove* (*to make worse*).
 - Longer periphrasis, where some lexemes are gaining semiaffix status: *differently abled* (*disabled*), *visually impaired* (*blind*), *physically different/ challenged* (*crippled*), *less developed/underdeveloped* (*laid-off*).

Nichol (2009, in www2, 2013: 1) mentions other types of techniques, they are:

- a) Litotes (understatement):** Sometimes, euphemism occurs in the form of this rhetorical device in which the gravity or force of an idea is softened or minimized by a double negative, as in the reference to someone as *being not unattractive*.
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- b) Mispronunciation:** Alteration of pronunciation is a form of euphemism, as when one says *frigging* or *shoot*, or *jeez* or *cripes*, so as not to offend people by using profanity (figurative or literal).
- c) Modification:** A bluntly offensive noun can be transformed into a euphemism by converting it to an adjective, as in saying someone has *socialist leanings* rather than labeling them *a socialist outright*.
- d) Personification:** another form of euphemism is when things that some people prefer not to mention candidly, such as genitals, are assigned personal names.
- e) Slang:** It produces an exclusive vocabulary to a social group as in the use of *joint* for *marijuana*.

2. The Hypothesis

The current study hypothesizes that death euphemism is a typical and common cultural phenomenon in both English and Arabic.

3. Aims of the Study

The study aims at investigating the euphemized expressions and words related to death, in both Arabic and English, and showing the reasons for using these expressions.

4. Death Euphemism

Death is an inevitable part of life; it happens to everyone at some point. It is often feared that some people are afraid to say words that are related to it such as *undertaker*, *death certificate*, and *corpses*. Therefore, people, tend deliberately to avoid the embarrassing expressions of death and replace them with more moderate ones. They resort to more soft words and expressions which provide a way to speak about death. Thus, people who have died are referred to as having *passed away* or *passed* or

departed rather than *died*. *Deceased* is used as a euphemism for "dead". (Palmer, 1972: 323)

4.1 Death Euphemism in English

Death euphemistic expressions fall into a set of categories. Here are some euphemistic expressions used for expressing death in English according to each category: (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 has died. *For example:*
 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. *For example:*
 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. *For example:*
 became a root inspector, biting the dust, checking out the grass from underneath, counting daisy roots, crow bait, food
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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. *For example:*

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. *For example:*

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. *For example:*

became living-challenged, gone to sleep city, gone to take his free kick at Hitler's backside, got stamped "return to sender", immortally challenged, kicked the oxygen habit, passed his sell-by date, permanently out of print, solitary confinement, tend towards a state of chemical equilibrium, winning one for the reaper.

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

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

As in English, Arabic euphemistic expressions for death fall into the same categories:

1- Religious:

انتقل الى الرفيق الاعلى، انتقل الى رحمته تعالى، لبي نداء ربه، أسلم الروح، سلم امانته، انتقل الى الدار الاخرة، لقي وجه ربه، فاضت روحه إلى السماء، اختاره الله، في جنات الخلد، سعدت روحه الى السماء، عادت روحه إلى بارئها، اسلم الروح إلى بارئها.

2- Medical:

لقد بذلنا كل ما في وسعنا (يستخدمها الأطباء عادة للتخفيف من وطأة خبر الموت على ذوي المتوفي).

3- Burial:

النعش، يوارى الثرى، مثواه الاخير، الجثمان، مراسم التشييع، موكب التشييع، اكليل الزهور، تحت التراب، نعية فاضل، الثوب الابيض (الكفن) عاد الى التراب، جثمانه الطاهر، الخ.

4- Murder/ Suicide:

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

5- General (Miscellaneous):

توفي، قضى، قضى نحبه، الوفاة، أنته المنية، وافته المنية، لم يعد على قيد الحياة، وافاه الاجل، لقي حتفه، حلت نهايته، دنا اجله، غيبة المنية، جاء يومه، جاءت ساعته، اتته الساعة، الردى، كلنا على هذا الطريق، لحق بأجداده، عمره قصير، لفظ الروح، الماسوف على شبابه، محمولا على الاكتاف، فارق الحياة، فارقت روحه الجسد، ترجل عن جواد الموسيقى، اقل نجمه، الخ.

Moreover, Al-Thalibi (d.1038: 105, 122, 170) mentions three classifications for euphemism expressions depending on the status of the dead person to the speaker.

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

انقضت ايامه، استأثر الله به، انتقل الى جوار ربه، انقلب الى كرامة الله وعفوه، خانه عمره، لم تسمح النوائب بالتجافي عن مهجته، اجاب داعي ربه، نفذ قضاء الله فيه، لحق بالسبيل التي لا احتراز منها ولا مجاز عنها، قبضه الله إليه، اسعده الله بجواره، دعاه الله فأجاب دعاءه ولبى نداءه، 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 اغصان الادب ذوى، شابت بعده لمم الاقلام وجفت غرر الكلام، قامت نوادب الادب وتعطلت حوالي الكتب.

3- Euphemism expressions for enemies:

افضى به سوء العاقبة الى العذاب الاليم والمال الذميم وسكنى الجحيم، قضى
نحبه ولقي بأسود صحيفة ربه، جراحه أتت على نفسه ووسدته في رمسه.

5. Death Euphemism in Arabic Poetry

Although there is no clear-cut date for the evolution of death euphemism, yet, both pre-Islam and after Islam poetry witness the use of death euphemism. Arabic poetic heritage involves awesome examples of death euphemism. Arabs used a polite style in uttering the death expressions to keep distance and avoid directness. Instead, they referred to it implicitly. 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.

Best verses of elegies were chosen with selective background information about bereaved people whose loved ones had deceased but they showed patience or grew impatient. Given wisdom and decisive speech, Arabs knew with splendid statement and high expression how to mitigate politely grief for their dead whom they loved. "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, 1968: 371).

Elegiac poetry is unique due to the following:

1. Mostly, it is subjective expressing a personal experience undergone by a poet.
2. Elegy has been connected with social, political, economic and religious reality.
3. It is 'experiential', i.e. it reflects a situation that has affected the poet's psychology. Therefore, the poet produces honest

verse out of her/his heart after suffering from the bitter parting of parents, brothers or sons.

4. It truly accounts for such facts in an expressive language.
5. It draws on beautiful poetic images, cohesion, coherence, harmonious rhythm and rhyme variation.

Examples:

What can be first observed by a reader or critic of elegiac poetry would be the dominance of mournful, tearful, doleful and sighful significations.

Al-Khansaa (Poetess):

يَا عَيْنِ مَا لَكَ لَا تَبْكِينَ تَسْكَابَا
إِذَا رَابَ دَهْرٌ وَكَانَ الدَّهْرُ رِيَابَا
فَأَبِكِ أَخَاكَ لِأَيْتَامٍ وَأَرْمَلَةٍ
وَأَبِكِ أَخَاكَ إِذَا جَاوَرَتْ أَجْنَابَا

*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*

Al-Khansaa sheds tears but not only that. She incites her eyes not to stop weeping tears and fears stopping crying, for she is agitated and dejected and her grief increases with the aggravation and exacerbation of her psychology. For her, crying is not a mere biological reaction of the eye, yet it is a kind of faithfulness to her brother and cherishing his memory after she was bereaved by his death. The brother was and generous, munificent and hospitable.

Elsewhere, after listing Sakhr's favours he did to orphans, widows and the poor, Al-Khansaa composes gem poems about

the great loss and disaster that befell her as the leading great knight and home protector. (www.4, 2013: np) (Al-Bustani, 1996: 5)

Ahmad Shawqi Lamenting Saad Zaghloul:

شيعوا الشمس ومالوا بضحاها وانحنى الشرق عليها فبكاها

*They escorted the sun for burial and leaned its forenoon
And the Orient bent over it to mourn the mate of moon*

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 ... يوشعُ همّت 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 she wills. Shawqi's Diwan

Hassan bin Thabit Lamenting Hamza and the Martyrs of Uhud:

فلا تذكروا قتلى وحمزة فيهم... قتل 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:

أعلمتَ مَنْ حملوا على الأعواد؟ أرايتَ كيف خبا ضياء النادي؟

Did you know who on the wooden stretcher was carried? Did you see how the light of club vanished?

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 the 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:

بكاؤكُمَا يشفي وإن كان لا يجدي ** فجودا فقد أودى نظيركُمَا 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 حَبَّاتِ القلوب على عمدٍ

*May Allah End death 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 (حَبَّاتِ القلوب 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:

تقاضاك دهرٌ فاقتضاك بدينه ... وللدَّهرِ في نفسي عليّ ديون

Time sued you and demanded from you the debt... And to time in my mind I owe many a debt

The poet avoided 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 got the ruling that he should return it to time accordingly.

دفنت بكفي بعض نفسي فأصبحت ... لها دافن من نفسها ودفين

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 a self-burial and being buried at the same time. At-Ta'azi wa l-Mawa'idh, v. 1, p. 192.

Zainab Bint Att-Tathriya/ Encyclopaedia of Arabic Poetry:

وكنت أعيروا الدمع قبلك من بكى وأنت على من مات بعدك شاغله

Before you I would lend tears to anyone cried but you diverted after you crying over any other who died

Zainab says that she used to lend her tears to anyone who needed 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, the feeling of fear, sympathy, the feeling of shame and the feeling of politeness. By using death euphemisms, any language speakers can easily avoid the unpleasantness and embarrassing death words and expressions and replace them with more

moderate ones. There are a great number of terms used as euphemisms in every aspect of daily life. People have to know them and carefully apply them in everyday language use so as to make them more and more effective in communication. Since different techniques are available to express euphemism, a speaker or a writer has a wider range of varieties to choose from. 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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