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# The Use of Euphemisms in Social Media Posts

A Paper

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Done under my  
supervision

A handwritten signature in blue ink, likely belonging to Haneen Ali Haleem.

Asst. Lect. Haneen Ali

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

فَدَعَا رَبَّهُ أَنِّي مَغْلُوبٌ فَأَنْتَصِرْ ﴿١٠﴾

فَفَتَحْنَا أَبْوَابَ السَّمَاءِ بِمَاءٍ مُّنْهَمِرٍ ﴿١١﴾

صَدَقَ اللّٰهُ الْعَظِیْمُ

سورة القمر – آية 10-11

“So he cried out to his Lord, “I am helpless, so help me!”

“So We opened the gates of the sky with pouring rain.”

Surat al Qamar – Verses 10-11

## **ABSTRACT**

The present study deals with a common linguistic phenomenon called euphemism. It plays a vital role in the process of communication. Euphemisms are polite words or phrases that are used to replace offensive or impolite words. This study sheds light on the functions and types of euphemistic expressions in social media, and discusses the use of euphemisms in social media platform Twitter. A total of 16 samples are selected, which contain euphemism related to the topic of the COVID-19 pandemic. These tweets are analyzed in terms of the type and function of the euphemism used. The results are discussed and compared, and finally the conclusions are stated at the end of the work.

## DEDICATION

*To my kind father... my role model,  
he taught me how to live with dignity and honor.*

*To my tender mother... I cannot find words that can  
describe her right; she is the epic of love and the joy  
of a lifetime.*

*To my siblings, my support and with whom I share my  
joys and my sorrows.*

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# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **Introduction**

### **1.1 Problem of the Study**

A very important event that affected all aspects of life was the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. This also had its effects on the language use, especially in social media because of the quarantine and everyone has to stay at home during the lockdown. Euphemisms are words or phrases that are used instead direct expressions that may be considered offensive or unpleasant. They are often used to soften or make a statement more socially acceptable or less harsh. Euphemisms are a form of politeness, and politeness is an essential part of communication in any language. This also includes communication on social media, which has become an important part of our everyday life. Therefore, this study tries to answer the following questions:

1. What are euphemisms and what are its types?
2. What are the functions of euphemisms?
3. What are the most commonly used type and function of euphemisms in Twitter posts about the COVID-19?

### **1.2 Aim of the Study**

The study aims to achieve the following aspects:

1. Define the concept of euphemisms and identify its types.
2. Identifying the functions of euphemisms.
3. Exploring the most commonly used type and function of euphemisms in COVID19 discourse on Twitter.

### **1.3 Hypotheses**

In this work, it is hypothesized that:

1. There are several types of euphemisms in English.
2. Euphemisms realize a number of functions in communication.
3. The most mentioned type of euphemism is that of (death/disease), and they realize the functions of amusement (ludic/uplifting) and protection (protective euphemism).

### **1.4 Procedure**

To achieve the aims of the work, the following steps are followed:

1. References are consulted to define euphemisms and identify its types and uses English
2. Data is collected from Twitter for analyzing the euphemisms about covid-19.
3. The results of analysis are compared and discussed.

### **1.5 Limits of the Study**

This study is limited to the analysis of the types and functions of euphemisms that are posted in the English language, on the social media platform Twitter, and during the year 2020 only.

### **1.6 Value**

Studying the functions of euphemisms is important for several reasons: First, understanding language use: by studying euphemisms, we can gain a deeper understanding of how language is used to convey meaning and how people use language to manage social interactions. Second, cultural awareness: by studying euphemisms, we can gain insights into cultural norms and values, and how they are expressed through language. This can help us to develop a better understanding of how people respond to events like the COVID19 pandemic.



## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Theoretical Framework**

This chapter presents the literary works related to the topic of this research. First, a definition is provided for the concept of euphemisms, describing its relation to politeness and the face-theory. Next, the different types and functions are discussed as realized in the English language. Finally, the Social Media Discourse is described, which will be the source of data in this project.

#### **2.1. Pragmatic Aspects**

##### **2.1.1 Politeness**

Politeness is a pragmatic concept that refers to the use of language and behavior to show respect, consideration, and deference towards others in social interactions. It is a way of signaling one's intentions and attitudes towards others and managing social relationships (Cook, 2003)

In language use, politeness involves a range of linguistic strategies such as expressing gratitude, apologizing, using indirect language, and avoiding confrontational or aggressive language. Politeness is also reflected in nonverbal behavior, such as gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language. These nonverbal cues are used to convey politeness and respect towards others and to regulate the interactional dynamics (Cook, 2003)

##### **2.1.2 Face Theory**

The face theory is a sociolinguistic concept that refers to the concept of face or one's public self-image and reputation in social interactions. The theory was first developed by sociologist Erving Goffman in the 1950s and later expanded by linguist Penelope Brown and philosopher Stephen Levinson in the 1980s.

According to the face theory, individuals have two types of face: positive face and negative face. Positive face refers to the desire for self-affirmation and recognition, while negative face refers to the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition.

In social interactions, there are two types of acts: face-saving acts and face-threatening acts. Face-saving acts are verbal or nonverbal strategies that individuals use in social interactions to maintain their own face or to uphold the face of others. Face-threatening acts are verbal or nonverbal behaviors that can potentially damage an individual's self-image, reputation, or social standing in a given social interaction. Face-threatening acts can be intentional or unintentional and can include a wide range of behaviors, such as criticisms, insults, rejections, or impositions (Brown and Levinson, 1978).

## **2.2 Euphemisms**

### **2.2.1 Definition**

Pragmatically, euphemisms are linguistic devices that are used to convey a particular message or intention while avoiding any potential negative social consequences of using more direct or offensive language. Euphemisms are often used in situations where the speaker wants to communicate something that may be considered taboo, sensitive, or offensive, but they also want to be sensitive to the listener's feelings or the social norms of the context (Allan and Burridge, 2006).

Crystal (2003) states that there are some words which many people avoid using because they may offend, harm, or embarrass other members of the society where politeness is concerned. Euphemism is a proper language style that people pursue in social communication in order to reach an ideal communication effect.

According to Mashak et al. (2012), euphemism is an international concept but it is conveyed according to the conventional norms of certain societies. It is known that euphemism is a form of language intentionally created in social relations to achieve ideal communication. Without them, any language would seem to be vulgar and rude and void of politeness to some degree. Euphemism can be described as the extension of ordinary words and phrases to express unpleasant and embarrassing ideas (Hudson, 2000).

Burridge (2012: 66) defines euphemisms as “sweet-sounding, or at least inoffensive, alternatives for expressions that speakers or writers prefer not to use in executing a particular communicative intention on a given occasion.”

Lutz (2000: 231) defines euphemism as “an inoffensive or positive word or phrase designed to avoid a harsh, unpleasant, or distasteful reality.”

### **2.2.2 Euphemisms and Politeness**

Euphemisms are often used as a tool for politeness because they allow speakers to express potentially sensitive or offensive information in a way that is less direct and less likely to cause offense. By using euphemisms, speakers can soften the impact of their words, show respect for the listener, and maintain positive social relationships.

Euphemisms are a type of **face-saving act** that individuals may use to avoid face-threatening effects of their speech. By using euphemisms, speakers can help to protect their own and the listener’s face. Euphemisms can be seen as a way of showing politeness and respect by avoiding direct language that might be seen as rude, impolite, or disrespectful. Moreover, euphemisms can help to maintain positive social relationships by avoiding the potential for offense or embarrassment (Chouliaraki, 2001).

For example, if someone is inviting a friend to an event that their friend cannot attend, they might use the euphemism "I'm afraid we'll have to do without you"

instead of saying "you're not invited." In this case, the euphemism serves as a tool for politeness by allowing the speaker to communicate the same message (that their friend is not invited) in a way that is less blunt and less likely to cause offense.

Similarly, euphemisms are often used to talk about sensitive topics, such as death or illness, in a way that is respectful and polite. For example, instead of saying "he died," someone might use the euphemism "he passed away." In this case, the euphemism serves as a tool for politeness by conveying the same message in a way that is less blunt and less likely to upset the listener, thus performing a "face-saving act" (Jay, 2009).

### **2.2.3 Categorization of Euphemisms**

Allan and Burridge (1991) divided the types of euphemism into 16 categories, namely: omission, flippancy, remodeling, circumlocutions, clipping, acronym, abbreviation, figurative expressions, one for one substitution, general for specific, part for whole euphemism, hyperbole, understatement, jargon, colloquial, and loan words.

Fujita (2008) divided types of euphemism into two: positive euphemism and negative euphemism. These two types of euphemism derive from the impact and rate of politeness. Thus, positive euphemism adds a pleasant feeling and makes the euphemistic items seem more important than they actually are. Meanwhile, negative euphemism is deflated and diminishes the meaning of euphemistic item; make them less pleasant or neutral.

In addition, Warren (1992) classifies types based on structural and semantic of euphemisms. There are four types of euphemism, including word formation devices, phonemic modification, loanwords, and semantic innovation.

### 2.2.4 Types of Euphemisms

Euphemisms are words or phrases used to substitute for a word or phrase that might be considered harsh, unpleasant, or offensive. Therefore, the types of euphemisms in language can be classified according to the topic they “cover” (Jay, 2009):

1. **Euphemisms for death:** This type of euphemism is used to describe death in a more gentle or indirect way, such as "passing away," "departing," or "going to a better place."
2. **Euphemisms for bodily functions:** These euphemisms are used to describe bodily functions or activities that may be considered vulgar or taboo, such as "going to the bathroom," "breaking wind," or "getting intimate."
3. **Euphemisms for disabilities or impairments:** This type of euphemism is used to describe a disability or impairment in a less stigmatizing way, such as "differently abled," "physically challenged," or "special needs."
4. **Euphemisms for sensitive or controversial topics:** These euphemisms are used to describe sensitive or controversial topics in a less confrontational way, such as "collateral damage" instead of civilian casualties in war, or "enhanced interrogation techniques" instead of torture.
5. **Euphemisms for profanity:** These euphemisms are used to replace profanity with a milder, less offensive word or phrase, such as "darn" instead of "damn," or "heck" instead of "hell."
6. **Euphemisms for social or political issues:** These euphemisms are used to describe social or political issues in a way that is less confrontational or controversial, such as "undocumented immigrant" instead of "illegal alien," or "revenue enhancement" instead of "tax increase."

## **2.2.5 Functions of Euphemisms**

The primary function of euphemisms is to replace words or phrases that may be considered harsh, unpleasant, or offensive with milder or more socially acceptable alternatives. Burridge summarizes the suggested functions of euphemisms as follows:

### **1. The protective euphemism — to shield and to avoid offense**

Euphemisms are characterized by avoidance language. They are verbal escape hatches created in response to taboos like bodily functions, violence, dishonesty, madness, disease, death, or fear (Adams, 1994).

### **2. The underhand euphemism — to mystify and to misrepresent**

Euphemisms can sometimes be misrepresenting or mystifying because they can obscure the true nature of a concept or situation. This can be when the speaker tries to conceal the truth, hide the true severity of something, or create false euphoria (Bybee, 2006).

### **3. The uplifting euphemism — to cheer up**

Euphemisms can be uplifting in some situations, used to soften the reality, create empathy, and promote optimism and hope (Adams, 1994).

### **4. The provocative euphemism — to reveal and to inspire**

Euphemisms can be provocative by intentionally challenging or subverting social norms, expectations, or taboos (Allan and Burridge, 2006).

### **5. The cohesive euphemism — to show solidarity**

Euphemisms can show solidarity by fostering a sense of unity, support, and understanding among individuals or groups, through creating a shared language, avoid judgement, and share experiences (Adams, 1994).

### **6. The ludic euphemism — to have fun and to entertain**

Euphemisms are created largely to amuse. Euphemisms can be used to entertain in language by adding humor, wit, or irony to communication (Crystal, 1998).

## **2.3 Social Media Discourse**

Social media discourse refers to the communication and exchange of ideas, opinions, and information that take place on social media platforms. It includes the various forms of written, spoken, visual, and multimedia content shared on these platforms, as well as the interactions, comments, and feedback generated by users. Social media discourse can encompass a wide range of topics, including news, politics, culture, entertainment, and personal experiences. It can take the form of debates, discussions, arguments, and even online activism.

The nature of social media discourse is often characterized by its speed, volume, and diversity. It can involve people from different parts of the world with different backgrounds and perspectives, making it a complex and dynamic space for communication and engagement.

### **2.3.1 Twitter**

Twitter is a social media platform that allows users to share short messages, called tweets, with their followers. Tweets can be up to 280 characters long and can include text, photos, videos, and links. Users can follow other users to see their tweets in their timeline and can also use hashtags to join conversations and make their tweets more discoverable. Twitter is used by both individuals and businesses, and even officials and governmental institutes or representatives (president, royal family, etc.). It has become a popular platform for breaking news and live events (Cotrău and Cotoc, 2019).

**Hashtags (#)** are used in Twitter to categorize tweets and make them more discoverable. Users can click on a hashtag to see all the tweets that have been tagged with it. Hashtags are often used to join conversations around a specific topic or event.

**The @ symbol** is used in Twitter to tag or mention other users in a tweet. When using someone's username preceded by the @ symbol in a tweet, that user will receive a notification that they have been mentioned. This is a way to start a conversation with someone or to give them credit for something. For example, if you wanted to thank someone for sharing your blog post, you might tweet, "Thanks for sharing my post, @username!"

**A retweet (RT)** is when you share someone else's tweet on your own Twitter profile. This can be done by clicking the retweet button on the original tweet or by manually retweeting by copying and pasting the tweet with "RT" and the original user's username. It can also help to increase visibility and engagement for both the original tweet and your own profile.



## CHAPTER THREE

### Methodology

This chapter explains the process of data collection and analysis followed in this project. It also states the limits of the work.

#### 3.1 Data Collection

Since this research deals with social media discourse, the platform Twitter has been chosen as the source of data samples. The reason for choosing Twitter is that it is easy to access, and the content can be easily searched for and saved. First, we created an account so that we could access the platform. Next, we used social media tools like the hashtag (#) and the user mentioning (@) to scrape content that involves euphemisms. After trying a number of keywords and hashtags, the three main search queries were (#COVID19) (#coronavirus) (#quarantine). From the resulting posts, a total of (16) samples were selected manually, deleting any repeated, irrelevant, or similar posts and content.

For the purpose of limitation, the dataset deals with COVID-19 related euphemisms in English only, which are posted on the Twitter platform rather than other forms of social media. The posts are all filtered to content posted during the year 2020, which is the year of the start of the pandemic.

#### 3.2 Data Analysis

After collecting and filtering the results to (16) samples, each sample is studied in detail. For each sample, the type and function of the euphemism are determined. All details are put together in a table, along with the explanation of each sample. This research has a qualitative analysis, which means that we try to explain the thematic analysis of the samples in their context. Finally, we draw a comparison between the most commonly and least commonly used types and functions of euphemisms in the selected dataset.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Result Analysis and Discussion

Chapter Four presents the results of the analysis in this project, followed by the discussion of these results.

#### 4.1 Results of Analysis

After studying the selected samples in detail, the type and function of each euphemism is determined. Table 4.1 shows the analysis results of the tweets.

For each analysis, the table shows the original text of the tweet. Next, we identify the euphemism and try to describe the originally idea or words that were intended. For each sample, the type and function of the euphemism are selected.

The **types** of euphemisms in English are based on the topic they conceal. They include euphemisms for (death, disability or impairment, bodily functions, sensitive or controversial topics, profanity, or social/political issues).

According to the **functions** or reason of using euphemisms rather than direct speech, they can be classified into (protective, underhand, uplifting, provocative, cohesive, and ludic).

**Table 4.1:** Data Analysis for COVID-19 Tweets

No.	Original Tweet	Euphemism	Type	Function
1	I'll never forget when government deployed soldiers to fight " an <b>invisible enemy</b> " what a year!!!	"invisible enemy" instead of "covid-19"	Euphemism for death/disease	Protective euphemism
2	Should add a few MILITARY soldiers in there: hospital workers are warriors against an <b>invisible enemy</b> . They are dying too.	"invisible enemy" instead of "covid-19"	Euphemism for death/disease	Protective euphemism
3	So tru. An <b>invisible enemy</b> is easy to make people fear because only your imagination limits how scary it can become	"invisible enemy" instead of "covid-19"	Euphemism for death/disease	Underhand euphemism

No.	Original Tweet	Euphemism	Type	Function
4	People of South Africa.. we know you can groove.. we know you can go to church every weekend to praise the lord .. but stop it .. we are in a fight with an <b>unknown enemy</b>	“unknown enemy” instead of “covid-19”	Euphemism for death/disease	Protective euphemism
5	Keep an eye out there, on portals and on your email for assignment updates, and reminders while we’re <b>on #coronabreak</b>	“coronabreak” instead of “quarantine”	Euphemism for social aspect	Ludic/Uplifting euphemism
6	Boring Zzz amid of long <b>#coronabreak</b> Sunday has lost its importance	“coronabreak” instead of “quarantine”	Euphemism for social aspect	Ludic/Uplifting euphemism
7	Louisiana is acting so hardheaded about this virus.. other states really scared and staying in the house, we down here talking about some <b>#coronabreak</b>	“coronabreak” instead of “quarantine”	Euphemism for social aspect	Ludic/Uplifting euphemism
8	Can we now please call it the <b>#Trumpdemic</b> from now on? <b>#Trumpvirus</b>	“trumpdemic” instead of “pandemic”	Euphemism for death/disease	Ludic/Provocative euphemism
		“trumpvirus” instead of “covid-19”	Euphemism for death/disease	Ludic/Provocative euphemism
9	I prefer calling it the <b>#trumpdemic</b> to the <b>#TrumpFlu</b> . But both seem appropriate.	“trumpdemic” instead of “pandemic”	Euphemism for death/disease	Ludic/Provocative euphemism
		“trumpflu” instead of “covid-19”	Euphemism for death/disease	Ludic/Provocative euphemism
10	I’ve had <b>#KungFlu</b> twice now. These mandates and restrictions are pointless.	“kungflu” instead of “covid-19”	Euphemism for death/disease	Ludic/Uplifting euphemism
11	Journalists should address POTUS about what they are doing to combat the <b>Trumpdemic</b>	“trumpdemic” instead of “pandemic”	Euphemism for death/disease	Ludic/Provocative euphemism
12	If the <b>#kungflu</b> virus was so dangerous, you would not have to mandate vaccination. It’s all about money, not people’s health!!	“kungflu” instead of “covid-19”	Euphemism for death/disease	Ludic/Uplifting euphemism
13	Every April, <b>miss rona</b> visits me and my family	“miss rona” instead of “covid-19”	Euphemism for death/disease	Ludic/Uplifting euphemism
14	Guess who caught <b>miss rona</b> for the first time this year	“miss rona” instead of “covid-19”	Euphemism for death/disease	Ludic/Uplifting euphemism
15	Tested Positive for <b>Miss Rona</b>	“miss rona” instead of “covid-19”	Euphemism for death/disease	Ludic/Uplifting euphemism
16	I pray for the health workers, the front liners, GOD gave them the courage to face the <b>unknown enemy</b>	“unknown enemy” instead of “covid-19”	Euphemism for death/disease	Protective euphemism

## 4.2 Discussion

As mentioned in Chapter Two, the use of euphemisms is a form of face-saving act, as the speaker tries to convey a message or idea without offending or harming the listener's feelings or "face". The results in Table (4.1) show that about three-quarter of the tweets involve a euphemism for death or disease. Phrases like "the invisible enemy" and "kungflu" and "miss rona" all refer to the same concept: the deadly COVID-19 virus.

However, the same euphemisms may be used for different functions. In sample (2), the phrase "**invisible/unknown enemy**" is used to prevent offence because mentioning COVID19 seems to have negative connotation. People are being terrified from this virus. Such an expression is used to make people feel more comfortable talking about this disease by not addressing it directly. It is therefore considered a protective euphemism.

As for the expressions "**TrumpVirus**", "**Trumpdemic**" and "**TrumpFlu**", they are coined with the name of the former US president Donald Trump. This is because COVID19 started during the era of Trump. This form of wordplay is used as a tool to criticize Trump's policy in dealing with the virus, especially after the increase in cases of this disease without any solution. This is a ludic euphemism created for the purpose of making fun or entertaining. At the same time, they imply critic on a political aspect, and they focus on the cause of the problem by mentioning his name directly and coining it with the virus "Trump". Therefore, it is also considered a provocative euphemism at the same time.

Miss Rona is a form of phonetic wordplay, whereby the phrase "**miss rona**" sounds similar to "corona" i.e. the covid-19 virus. This is a ludic and uplifting euphemism used to jokingly refer to the deadly virus without provoking or offending the listener. "KungFlu" is a wordplay on the term "kung fu", a common Chinese martial art. It refers to the fact that covid-19 started in China first.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conclusions and Future Works

#### 5.1 Conclusions

This research studied the concept of euphemisms as a tool of politeness in communication in social media discourse. After the analysis of the selected samples and discussing the results, there are a number of conclusions drawn:

1. In general, there are six **types of euphemisms** found in English. They include euphemisms for (death, disability or impairment, bodily functions, sensitive or controversial topics, profanity, or social/political issues).
2. According to the **functions** or reason of using euphemisms rather than direct speech, euphemisms can be classified into (protective, underhand, uplifting, provocative, cohesive, and ludic).
3. The analysis of the social media posts on Twitter shows that the most commonly used type of euphemisms in COVID-19 discourse is the euphemism for **death or disease**, namely for the deadly COVID-19 virus. However, these death/disease euphemisms perform different functions. The most occurring function is amusement (**ludic and uplifting euphemism**), followed by (**protective euphemism**) to avoid offending people by mentioning the deadly virus directly.

#### 5.2 Future Works

In the future, there are some related topics that may be researched:

1. The functions of euphemisms in other social media platforms, like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok.
2. Comparing the types and functions of euphemisms across different languages, other than Arabic and English.

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