

EUPHEMISMS IN EDUCATION: A LINGUISTIC AND SOCIO-CULTURAL ANALYSIS

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17807859>

Saidova Mukhayyo Umedilloeyvna

*Associate Professor of the
Department of English Linguistics,
PhD in Philological Sciences*

Abduvohobova Dildora Ahmadjon kizi

*Master's Student of The Bukhara
State University, Faculty of Linguistics
Email: abduvohobovadildora107@gmail.com*

Abstract

Euphemisms constitute a key linguistic strategy used to mitigate harsh meanings, manage social relations, and maintain institutional harmony. Despite their ubiquity, euphemisms in education have not been extensively analyzed compared to their presence in political, medical, or business discourse. This study investigates the forms, functions, and socio-pragmatic motivations of euphemisms used in educational contexts.

Key words

behavioral euphemism, institutional euphemism, disciplinary euphemisms, teacher-student interactions.

ЭВФЕМИЗМЫ В ОБРАЗОВАНИИ: ЛИНГВИСТИЧЕСКИЙ И СОЦИОКУЛЬТУРНЫЙ АНАЛИЗ

*Абдувохобова Дилдора Ахмаджон кизи
Бухарский государственный университет
Магистрант факультета лингвистики
Email: abduvohobovadildora107@gmail.com*

Аннотация

Эвфемизмы представляют собой важную лингвистическую стратегию, используемую для смягчения резких значений, регулирования социальных отношений и поддержания институциональной гармонии. Несмотря на их повсеместность, эвфемизмы в образовании изучены недостаточно по сравнению с их использованием в политическом, медицинском или деловом

дискурсе.

Ключевые слова

поведенческий эвфемизм, институциональный эвфемизм, дисциплинарные эвфемизмы, взаимодействие учителя и ученика.

Introduction. Educational institutions are linguistic environments where communication shapes social identities, cognitive development, and institutional culture. Teachers, administrators, students, and policymakers interact through a system of language that does more than transmit information; it also expresses values, power dynamics, and emotional sensitivities. Euphemisms are words or expressions used to soften, obscure, or politely reframe meanings are central to this communicative ecosystem. In education, euphemisms often emerge when teachers discuss sensitive issues, such as student misbehavior, academic failure, disciplinary action, learning difficulties, or institutional shortcomings. They function to reduce emotional harm, preserve face, and maintain harmony in hierarchical relationships [1]. The presence of euphemisms in the classroom is not accidental. Schools are formal environments governed by behavioral expectations, institutional ideologies, and socio-cultural norms of politeness. Teachers frequently employ softened expressions such as “needs improvement” instead of “is failing,” or “energetic” instead of “disruptive,” to balance clarity and diplomacy. Administrators may use bureaucratic euphemisms such as “resource reallocation” for budget cuts, or “policy adjustment” for restrictive measures. Such expressions allow institutions to manage public perception and mitigate conflict [2].

This study aims to provide a comprehensive examination of euphemisms in educational environments using a linguo-pragmatic approach. It identifies major types of euphemisms, explores their communicative functions, and analyses how they affect teaching, learning, and institutional relationships.

Literature Review. Research on euphemisms has traditionally focused on politeness theory, socio-cultural taboos, and pragmatic strategies. Euphemisms are conceptualized as linguistic devices that replace direct or potentially offensive expressions with more polite or indirect alternatives [3]. Allan and Burridge’s foundational work describes euphemisms as part of a “linguistic etiquette” that protects both the speaker and the listener from social discomfort [4].

1.1 Euphemisms in Institutional Discourse. Institutional language is particularly prone to euphemisms. Fairclough argues that institutions often use euphemisms to maintain authority and produce ideologically appealing narratives [5]. In bureaucratic contexts, vague or softened expressions help avoid responsibility and manage public perception. For example, the term “downsizing”

in business, or “operational pause” in government documents, conceals harsher realities. In educational institutions, similar patterns emerge in communication with parents, public stakeholders, and teachers.

1.2 Euphemisms and Politeness. Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory is crucial for understanding euphemisms in educational settings. According to their framework, speakers use euphemisms to preserve “positive face” (the desire to be approved) and “negative face” (the desire to be unburdened) [6]. Teachers often soften feedback to protect students’ emotional well-being and self-esteem.

1.3 Euphemisms in Pedagogy. Several studies have explored teacher discourse strategies, noting that educators frequently use indirect expressions to maintain rapport and foster a supportive learning environment [7]. Feedback such as “you could consider revising this part” instead of “this is wrong” is an example of pedagogical euphemism. Some scholars argue that euphemisms contribute to a “culture of kindness” that encourages positive reinforcement [8]. However, others claim that euphemisms dilute clarity and hinder academic honesty, especially when discussing poor performance [9].

Methodology. This study employed a qualitative research design to examine the forms, functions, and socio-pragmatic motivations of euphemisms used within educational settings. The data were collected from three primary sources, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of euphemistic usage across multiple layers of institutional and pedagogical communication. First, a range of institutional documents including school policies, administrative announcements, assessment rubrics, and public relations materials was analyzed to identify formal and semi-formal euphemistic expressions used at the administrative level.

The second source of data consisted of teacher-student classroom interactions. Transcripts of classroom discussions, teacher feedback sessions, and exchanges from online learning platforms were examined to capture natural instances of euphemisms occurring in everyday pedagogical communication. These interactions revealed how teachers strategically soften feedback, manage behavioral issues, and maintain rapport with students while navigating delicate classroom situations. The third component of the dataset involved semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with five teachers and three school administrators. These interviews explored participants’ perspectives on their use of euphemisms, the motivations behind such choices, and the communicative challenges they encountered.

Data analysis followed a thematic coding framework. The process began with the identification of euphemistic expressions across all sources, after which the items were classified into semantic categories based on shared linguistic and functional features. The final stage of analysis involved interpreting

the findings within broader socio-cultural and pedagogical contexts, considering how educational norms, professional expectations, and cultural values shape the need for euphemistic language. Euphemisms whose meanings were ambiguous or contextually unclear were excluded from the final dataset. Ultimately, the analysis was conducted on a corpus of more than 240 euphemistic expressions, providing a robust empirical basis for the results presented in the following section.

Results. The analysis of the collected data revealed four major categories of euphemisms used in educational contexts, each serving distinct communicative and socio-pragmatic functions within school environments. The first category, behavioral euphemisms, encompassed expressions used by teachers to describe student conduct in a less confrontational and more socially acceptable manner. Terms such as “energetic”, “socially active”, “needs redirection”, “expressive”, and “emotionally sensitive” were frequently employed to refer to disruptive, excessively talkative, inattentive, rude, or tantrum-prone behaviors, respectively. Teachers reported that such linguistic choices allowed them to protect students’ dignity, avoid direct labelling, and communicate behavioral concerns diplomatically, particularly when speaking with parents.

A second prominent category consisted of performance-related euphemisms, which emerged primarily in teachers’ feedback on academic achievement. Expressions like “needs improvement”, “developing skills”, “not yet meeting expectations”, and “incomplete understanding” were used to soften the negative implications of failing grades, poor performance, or conceptual misunderstandings. These euphemisms helped maintain students’ motivation and self-esteem by framing difficulties as part of a gradual learning process rather than as permanent shortcomings. Institutional euphemisms formed the third category and were predominantly found in administrative documents and public communications issued by school leadership. Phrases such as “resource reallocation”, “restructuring”, “policy adjustment”, and “learning environment enhancement” served to present sensitive or potentially unpopular decisions such as budget cuts, staff reductions, new restrictions, or increased surveillance in a more positive and strategically crafted manner. The final category identified in the dataset was disciplinary euphemisms, which were used to frame punitive measures as supportive or developmental interventions. Terms including “time-out space”, “reflection period”, “behavior contract”, and “parental involvement recommended” were frequently used to refer to punishment rooms, detention, official warnings, and serious misbehavior, respectively. By reframing disciplinary actions through softer terminology, schools aimed to reduce confrontation,

maintain an atmosphere of pastoral care, and reinforce the perception that behavioral interventions were constructive rather than punitive.

Discussion. The findings of the study demonstrate that euphemisms fulfil several essential communicative functions in educational settings, particularly in relation to politeness, emotional protection, institutional discourse, and socio-cultural expectations. To begin with, the analysis confirms that euphemistic expressions operate as important face-saving strategies. Teachers frequently soften criticism or behavioral remarks in order to protect students' positive self-image and to maintain harmonious interpersonal relationships in the classroom. This aligns with key principles of politeness theory, which emphasize the role of indirectness in preserving social rapport and reducing the risk of face-threatening acts. Thus, euphemisms become a practical linguistic resource for navigating sensitive interactions between teachers, students, and parents. Another significant dimension concerns the tension between emotional protection and academic clarity. Students who consistently receive vague or overly positive descriptors such as being told they are "improving" rather than struggling may develop inaccurate perceptions of their true performance. This finding supports previous arguments that over-euphemisms can reduce transparency in assessment and ultimately hinder students' ability to identify and address their learning gaps.

Administrators often use strategically framed language to present organizational decisions in a more neutral or favorable light, thereby minimizing potential resistance from the school community. This pattern resonates with theoretical perspectives, including Foucault's view that institutions employ language as a tool for shaping social reality and maintaining authority. Socio-cultural norms further shape the use of euphemisms in schools. Many behavioral and performance-related euphemisms arise from societal expectations surrounding politeness, child protection, and respectfulness. Direct references to misbehavior or academic weakness are often avoided to prevent parental backlash, reduce stigma, and uphold community values. Euphemisms thus serve as a buffer through which teachers negotiate cultural ideals related to emotional sensitivity, appropriate conduct, and preserving students' dignity. From a pedagogical perspective, the study highlights both the benefits and limitations of euphemistic communication. When used thoughtfully, euphemisms can contribute to supportive learning environments by lowering anxiety, strengthening student-teacher trust, and promoting constructive forms of feedback. However, when overused or insufficiently clear, they can hinder accountability, create misunderstandings with parents, and encourage unrealistic self-assessments among students. Teachers must therefore strike a careful balance between diplomatic communication and the need

for transparency, ensuring that their language supports rather than obscures learning. Finally, the ethical dimension of euphemistic usage deserves consideration. While euphemisms can be a compassionate and socially sensitive linguistic strategy, their misuse particularly within administrative discourse may undermine trust or mask systemic issues. Ethical communication in educational institutions requires openness, clarity, and responsibility.

Conclusion. Euphemisms are an integral part of educational communication. They perform essential social and pedagogical functions, helping teachers maintain politeness, manage emotions, and support student well-being. Institutional euphemisms play a role in shaping public perception and managing policy communication. However, euphemisms must be used with caution because they can distort meaning, hinder academic honesty, and perpetuate power imbalances. This study demonstrates that euphemisms in education reflect broader socio-cultural norms, emotional expectations, and power structures. It offers a systematic taxonomy of euphemism types and highlights the complexity of their use in real educational contexts. For educators, conscious awareness of euphemistic language is crucial.

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