# A Contrastive Study of Euphemism Between English and Chinese

## - Taking Rejection as an Example

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*Abstract:* This paper investigates the nuances of euphemism language in refuse, comparing English and Chinese expressions. Politeness, a crucial aspect of communication, exhibits distinct cultural influences. The backdrop of communication underscores the pivotal role of politeness, particularly shaped by cultural disparities in English and Chinese. A thorough examination of these differences contributes to a comprehensive grasp of cultural variations in language expression. The study aims to discern commonalities and differences in the use of euphemism language, exploring frequency, expressions, and cultural implications. Adopting a comparative analysis approach, linguistic data related to requests is collected and analyzed. Findings reveal shared social strategies and illuminate the influential role of cultural backgrounds in shaping language expression during requests. English tends to be more direct, while Chinese prefers softer, more indirect approaches. Social relationships are crucial, with English culture maintaining looser ties and Chinese culture prioritizing face-saving and relationship preservation. Pragmatic strategies, including the use of mitigated language, are influenced by context and participant relationships. This comparative exploration not only deepens our understanding of cultural differences between English and Chinese but also provides valuable insights for linguistics and cross-cultural communication research, enhancing our appreciation for the intricate interplay between language and culture.

*Keywords:* Cultural Nuances, Language Expression, Cross-cultural Communication, Linguistics

## 1. Introduction

In different cultures and contexts, people often express their feelings, opinions, and wishes through euphemisms in order to maintain social relations and avoid direct conflicts. As two of the most widely used languages in the world, English and Chinese have their own unique cultural characteristics. This study will focus on the following core questions: What are the similarities and differences in the frequency, types, and cultural factors behind euphemism in English and Chinese? In different contexts, what are the differences in euphemism strategies people use to express requests or rejections? Through the in-depth study of these issues, we aim to reveal the cultural origins of English and Chinese euphemisms and provide useful enlightenment for daily communication and international

exchange. In order to answer the above questions, this study will adopt the methods of corpus analysis and comparative research, and comprehensively grasp the application rules of English and Chinese euphemism. Through these means, we expect to be able to draw reliable and comprehensive research conclusions to provide empirical support for cross-cultural research on euphemism. The research results will not only promote English and Chinese learners to use euphemisms more sensitively and effectively in cross-cultural communication, but also provide practical guidance for international business, diplomatic communication, and other fields, and strengthen the construction and maintenance of interpersonal relationships in different contexts.

## 2. Cultural Impact on Euphemistic Language

Chinese and English belong to different language families and are two independent language systems, so there are great differences between the two languages. Due to the different natural environment, social environment, lifestyle, and value concepts of different countries and different nationalities, various languages have their own characteristics, and the different social cultures of China and the West will inevitably be reflected in euphemisms.

### 2.1. Differences between Chinese and Western Cultural Values

Chinese culture belongs to the rural economy type, centered on familism, paying attention to ancestor worship, and advocating ethics. On the other hand, the British and American cultural model is an industrial economic model with individualism as the center, focusing on independence and enterprise, and not superstitious about privilege and tradition. In traditional Chinese cultural values, people do not have their own independent personalities. The status and value of people under the same conditions are measured by age, and seniority is a very common phenomenon. Therefore, the difference in attitude towards "old" is a typical embodiment of Chinese and Western cultural values.

Chinese people believe that old people have rich experience and are a symbol of wisdom. China has always had the traditional culture and values of "respecting the old and respecting the wise". At the same time, the traditional Chinese close family structure and the traditional concept of "raising children for the old" make the Chinese people "attach importance to the family" and "attach importance to ethics and human feelings". In traditional Chinese culture, "old" is not a taboo word, "old" represents experience, knowledge, maturity, and reliability, and old age is a symbol of seniority and status [1]. The elderly are generally respected in society, and old age is not to be feared, so there are few euphemisms in this regard. Common ones are "candle in the wind", "advanced age". Moreover, the elderly in China are more proud of "old and strong", "old and wise", more like: "do not listen to the elderly, suffer losses in front of you", "I have eaten more salt than you have eaten rice". Such language appears to express the rich experience of the elderly. The elderly are not afraid to talk about the old, and society naturally does not taboo the word "old". Such as, "Old man, how old are you?" and "Old lady, you are really strong!". Chinese people are used to putting "Lao" before and after the surname to show respect and kindness, such as: "Lao Wang" and "Guo Lao", etc. the former shows kindness, the latter shows respect, and the respect is deeper than the former. In China, the word "old" also has respect, meaning authority and wisdom, so "ginger or old spicy", "old man", "old master", "old chief", "boss", and "old Chinese medicine", and so on, have become honorific titles.

However, in Western society, the family structure is loose, and it is the traditional habit of Western society for children to live apart from their parents after they become adults, and the social pension mechanism cannot completely replace the family pension, so the elderly live lonely and lonely, so "old" has become a big taboo in life. It means rigid thinking, aging knowledge, dullness, love of nagging, stubbornness, willfulness, eccentricity, and so on. So, English has a lot of euphemisms for "old" [2]. Old is taboo to people. They think "loser" is a synonym for useless. So many euphemisms

have been created to replace the word "old". "Seasoned man," "elder statesman," "nursing home," "rest home," "adult communities," and so on. Another example: "…and it is no accident that Dicken's Scrooge was a senior citizen, for avarice was the sin of the aged..." [3].

## 2.2. Differences between Chinese and Western Ethical Concepts

In China, the time-honored culture and the tradition of respecting one's ancestors have given birth to a wide range of "taboo names" and taboos in terms of titles in Chinese. The society has established a democratic and equal social system, but in interpersonal communication, people pay more attention to the concept of hierarchy. "Name taboo" and the taboos on the appellation still exist, that is, on the lower or the older can be named, and on the upper is called the official position, the younger generation cannot directly call the name of the elder, such as the director "Wang four", the superior can call his name, the lower is generally called "Wang director", "Wang chu" and avoid direct call name. Traditional Chinese culture has always attached great importance to "Zong", and the custom of respecting ancestors and taboos on titles have been inherited to this day. In most Chinese families, children dare not call their parents or elders by their names. Otherwise, they will be regarded as impolite. This kind of traditional etiquette system, such as "the son does not name the parents", "the minister does not name the king" and "the upper and lower politeness, the elder and the younger are orderly", not only fully reflects the national mentality of the Chinese people to respect the elders, but also reflects the value concept of the Chinese people to promote self-degradation and not highlight the individual [4]. This is different from Western culture, in which there is no significant hierarchical concept in British and American culture, and the idea of "everyone is equal" is pursued. In their eyes, too serious address, will hinder interpersonal communication. British and American people like to call each other by name to show kindness, even children to parents, subordinates to superiors, students to professors can also call by their first name [5]. In the West, if an old lady is called "Grandma, Granny", she will explicitly refuse, and would rather be called by her first name than receive the honorific title "grandma". Grandma makes people feel old, so Grandma is not happy to accept it. Similarly, in the United Kingdom and the United States, there are no name taboos, and it is very common for younger generations to use the names of their elders.

## 3. Cross-Cultural Comparison of Euphemistic Expressions in Refusals

### 3.1. Similarities between Chinese and English Rejections

As two different language systems in the world, Chinese and English are closely related to the cultural backgrounds of their respective countries. As we all know, China has a glorious history of 5,000 years of civilizational development, and the accumulation and emergence of each period of history and civilization are linked to China's political, economic, cultural, and other factors at that time. Similarly, in English-speaking countries, the emergence and development of each history and civilization are determined by the social development of each country. With the increasingly frequent and close cultural exchanges between countries in the world, more and more people have gradually begun to participate in the circle of language research. According to the theme of this time, when it comes to rejection, people often think that it is associated with words such as "face", "face" and "dignity" [6]. On the one hand, in the process of cross-cultural communication, face is related to the communicator's personal image, and refusing words can be said to be a threatening behavior to the communicator's face, so long as the rejected words, no matter how serious, will more or less damage the face of one party or even both sides of the communication. In the process of communication, both parties as communicators do not want their face to be attacked by the other party. On the other hand, since Chinese and English are not the same in terms of language expression, politeness will be involved in a smooth cross-cultural communication. How to treat others politely and how to refuse others can be

considered real politeness. Then, thinking from the perspective of others can often alleviate the unhappiness caused by rejection between the two parties.

Chinese and English rejections are different to a large extent, but there are also many similarities. In the detailed analysis of various rejection speech acts, it is important to make clear the similarities between English and Chinese rejections speech acts, because it can better help us to use rejections in cross-cultural communication.

According to the survey data, both Chinese and English rejections have two forms of expression: direct rejections and indirect rejections [7]. On the other hand, the so-called direct refusal can be understood as a refusal without any confidentiality in the dialogue. The speaking party directly and clearly states its intention to the other party without giving too many reasons. This kind of direct refusal is the most impolite, because it often makes the other party feel that it has no face. At the same time, it can be seen that the speaker is not polite when refusing others, and lacks certain polite cultivation. For example, "no", "can't", "don't go", "can't", "don't", and "don't" in Chinese dialogue are some languages that express direct refusal in conversation, "I can't do it", "I refuse to do it", while "no" is directly used in English conversation "way" is also a direct rejection [8]. However, it should be noted that there is an exception to the case of "no", that is, in the scenario of a negative question and a positive answer, "no" does not mean a rejection in this case, but means "yes" or "no". In some communication activities that express "expectation", "demand", "command", etc., "no" and "request" express a direct rejection, while in the negative question and positive answer sentences, "no" does not carry the meaning of rejection. The disadvantages presented by direct rejection are not conducive to the smooth progress of communication in many cases, and will also make the communication parties fall into an awkward and embarrassing atmosphere. Under normal circumstances, this kind of rejection is often not approved in interpersonal communication, because it is too blunt, cold, and lacking in human touch [9].

## 3.2. Differences between Chinese and English Rejections

There are great differences between Chinese and English rejections in their application, which are mainly manifested in the syntax of rejections, different occasions of communication, and the degree of rejections. Because of the differences between Chinese and Western languages in these aspects, as well as their different understandings of politeness or face, they choose different ways to refuse when using refusal words. Next, let's focus on the differences between Chinese and English rejections:

The refusal speech strategy can be understood as the act of expressing the meaning of refusal through vocal discourse in the process of communication. Research shows that on social occasions, people are willing to follow the principles of cooperation and politeness to some extent, in order to maintain their own face and take care of each other's face and dignity, because the communication mode based on the principle of cooperation or politeness can better reflect the quality and accomplishment of both parties [10]. And in doing so, we respect others and also respect ourselves, taking into account the face of the other party while our own. However, in social communication, although people sometimes follow some principles of cooperation or politeness, there will be a phenomenon of running-in between the two parties during this period because on different occasions, with the change of the surrounding environment or the identity of the other party, people's psychological activities and speaking motives will also change, so that different speech strategies will be produced.

Secondly, the differences between Chinese and English rejections are mainly related to syntactic structure, tense, voice, and so on. It is precisely because of the differences in syntax between Chinese and English that they show different forms and characteristics in communication. In terms of syntax, the Chinese rejection language pays more attention to the content and semantics of sentences, and does not adhere too much to external forms. It can express the meaning of sentences, let alone pay

too much attention to the various components of sentences. It only needs to clarify the logical components between sentences in the process of communication. As long as the semantics are complete, the meaning of the whole sentence will be expressed [11]. In addition, the Chinese rejection language does not use too many connectives in the process of application. Although the sentences are sometimes looser from a formal point of view, it does not prevent the completeness of the sentence in terms of meaning expression. English rejection is different because, in terms of, syntactic structure, English pays more attention to the integrity of the sentence, so the situation of the sentence seems too compact. As we know, subject and verb (object) in English is the backbone of the whole sentence, and sometimes some other components are added. However, in the process of conversation, English is not as flexible as Chinese in expression form. Because the sentence components between English cannot be omitted, especially the subject components, from daily communication and data can be seen, even if English can only add the formal subject, but also must maintain the integrity of the sentence components [12].

## 4. Conclusion

Through the in-depth study of euphemistic rejection in English and Chinese, we can draw the following conclusions: the application of euphemism in rejection is influenced by many factors, such as culture, social distance, and context, and presents obvious differences. In English, euphemistic refusal is usually achieved through polite phrasing, indirect tone, and providing a reasonable explanation, emphasizing direct communication and respect for individual rights. In contrast, in Chinese, euphemistic refusal pays more attention to polite language, polite expression, and respect for others' faces, which reflect the cultural characteristics of collectivism and social hierarchy.

This research has practical significance for language learners and intercultural communicators. However, there are some limitations to this study. While every effort has been made to cover the differences between English and Chinese, the differences between the two languages are still complex and multifaceted, and there may be other aspects not covered. In addition, psychological and sociological theories can be combined to study the impact of euphemism on individual psychological states and social relations, so as to understand the role of euphemism in cross-cultural communication more comprehensively.

In future studies, we expect to explore the rich expression of euphemism in different contexts through more multi-dimensional comparison, so as to provide more powerful support for improving the effect of cross-cultural communication.

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