



## PHILOLOGY

DOI: 10.54631/VS.2022.62-106111

### EUPHEMIA AS A LINGUOCULTURAL PHENOMENON OF THE VIETNAMESE LANGUAGE

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**Abstract.** The article analyzes euphemia as a linguocultural phenomenon in the Vietnamese language. It examines the interrelationship between euphemisms and taboos. The author distinguishes five functional types of euphemisms. They are: euphemisms-word taboos used to avoid names of frightful things and phenomena; euphemisms to substitute something obscene, indecent, unpleasant; etiquette euphemisms; political euphemisms; puns (wordplay) for an intended humorous effect. There are the following large fields of euphemisms: everyday-spoken and socio-political. There have been determined euphemism formation modes which are divided into two large categories: structural (formal) and lexico-semantic ones. The article analyzes different euphemism formation modes. In the course of the study, the author has used a broad illustrative material. The research work relevance is due to the widespread usage of euphemisms in the media and communication.

**Keywords:** Vietnamese language, linguoculture, euphemia, euphemism, taboo, sacred animals, names.

**For citation:** Andreeva, V.A. (2022) Euphemia as a Linguocultural Phenomenon of the Vietnamese Language. *Russian Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 6 (2): 82–89.

Received: April 9, 2022

Received in revised form: April 15, 2022

Accepted: May 31, 2022

### Introduction

Euphemia belongs to linguistic universals, being the universal socio-cultural, linguistic and communicative phenomenon in languages of the world. Linguists of different countries began to research euphemisms in the second half of the twentieth century. There were published some dictionaries of euphemisms in English-speaking countries. Such dictionaries have been issued in Russia at the beginning of the twenty-first century [Senichkina 2008, Kovshova 2007]. So far, there have been neither dictionaries of euphemisms, nor even notes on euphemisms in explanatory dictionaries in Vietnam.

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The linguistic encyclopedic dictionary gives the following definition of euphemisms: “Euphemisms are emotionally neutral words or expressions, substituting synonymous words or expressions which a speaker considers obscene, rude or tactless... Also, they substitute taboo names, archaic... and new...” [Lingvisticheskij enciklopedicheskij slovar': 890]. However, A. Baranov and D. Dobrovol'sky mention insufficient correctness of this definition, while there is a number of expressions which are not emotionally neutral, but they substitute still ruder obscene taboo analogues [Baranov 2015]. A number of researchers interpret euphemisms in a broad sense. For them euphemisms are: Latin names of diseases, used by doctors to conceal a real diagnosis from a patient, slang words and expressions and means of professional secret speech used to conceal the sense from the uninitiated, general nominations instead of concrete ones, some stock phrases, etc. [Krysin 1994]. Well-known researcher V.P. Moskvin comes out for favor of clear separation of closely-related phenomena (professional cryptolalia, disinformation) [Moskvin 2001]. In this work I share the approach to the phenomenon of euphemia as formulated by M.L. Kovshova: euphemisms are “permitted words and expressions substituting those forbidden or restricted in their usage with etiquette, ethical, legal, ideological norms and customs adopted in the given linguocultural community. Euphemisms substitute words and expressions which, in a speaker's opinion, are undesirable, do not respond to the communication purpose and can result in communicative failure” [Kovshova 2019: 36].

The researches devoted to euphemisms and taboo words are relatively few in Vietnamese linguistics. Tran Thi Hong Hanh studies linguacultural features of Vietnamese euphemisms [Trần Thị Hồng Hạnh 2015], Doan Tien Luc researches the euphemisms formation modes [Đoàn Tiến Lực 2012]. Nguyen Duc Dan in his article “Taboo and Euphemisms” determines five groups of taboo words in the Vietnamese language, as follows: undesirable, needed to be concealed; physiological excretions; culture, customs, and beliefs; taboo names [Nguyễn Đức Dân 2005: 41]. Bui Thi Ngoc Anh investigates the methods to represent taboo words in the articles of the Vietnamese language dictionary edited by Hoang Phe [Bùi Thị Ngọc Anh 2012]. In their comparative works researchers mention common features and show differences between various groups of euphemisms in Vietnamese and in a number of other languages, such as Chinese [Hoàng Thị Liễu 2015], Khmer [Đào Thị Kim Duyên 2015], English [Trương Viên 2003].

As far as I know, there has been neither comprehensive study nor system research of euphemisms in the Vietnamese language, nor by foreign researchers.

The task of this research is the analysis of euphemia features in the Vietnamese language, the ratio of taboo words and euphemisms, classification of functional types of euphemisms in the Vietnamese language, identification of modes and linguistic means for euphemisms formation, and definition of their structural and semantic features. The author used methods of structural and semantic analysis and of componential analysis, descriptive-analytical method, contextual analysis, the Internet and mass media continuous selection methodology.

### **Taboo words and euphemisms**

It is universally recognized that the euphemia phenomenon is genetically connected with such a linguocultural sign as taboo. In ancient times taboo like a cultural universal emerged on the base of mythology. It was connected with human fear of supernatural forces, obscure natural phenomena; its expression was a strict public ban on some actions or things. Also, taboo spread on words. This was connected with human belief in a magic function of the speech, in the ability of language to directly

influence the environment. Thus, numerous cultures banned on the usage of deities', spirits' and demons' names, as well as on mentioning terrible animals, natural phenomena, diseases and death. To substitute taboo words, they used other words, namely, euphemisms.

Many peoples had euphemisms for dangerous or sacred animals, but the objects varied. Thus, the Russian language tabooed the name of "a bear", while in Vietnamese the word was "a tiger": *Ông* "ruler", *Ngài* "master", *son quân* "sovereign of mountains", *chúa tể sơn lâm* "ruler (lord) of mountains and woods", *ông ba mươi* "lord Thirty" (there are different explanations of the origin of this euphemism: the tiger came to a village for a victim on the thirtieth, darkest, night of the lunar month; on the thirtieth of December, the last day of the lunar year, there were made offerings to the tiger. Another interpretation is that emperor Gia Long declared either the punishment of thirty sticks for those who killed the tiger or the reward of thirty coins for those who caught the tiger alive). In some coastal areas of Vietnam there is the whale's cult, which, according to fishers' beliefs, is a sacred animal. There are such euphemisms for the whale, like *Cá ông* "fish-lord", *Ông Nam Hải* "sovereign of the South Sea". To name the menacing element of fire, they used the euphemism of *Bà Hỏa* "Fire Lady (Fire Goddess)": *Bà hỏa thiêu rụi hai nhà dân* "fire destructed two dwelling houses".

A lot of cultures euphemized such a frightful phenomenon like death. In the Vietnamese language there are numerous euphemisms for naming death, either: *đi* "to leave", *ra đi vĩnh viễn* "to leave forever", *từ trần* "to pass away" (to leave the world), *nhắm mắt xuôi tay* "to shut one's eyes, to stretch out one's arms", *trút hơi thở cuối cùng* "to breathe one's last", *đi vào giấc ngủ ngàn thu* "to be off to an eternal sleep", *về với tổ tiên* "to join one's ancestors", *về cõi tiên* "to go to the land of the Celestials", *quy tiên* "go to Heaven", *về nơi chín suối* "to go to the place of nine sources" (i.e., the sources of the nine greatest Chinese rivers, flowing in the underworld of the dead), etc.

One of the examples of taboo in Vietnamese culture was the taboo for the names which existed in many Oriental cultures, particularly, in Chinese one. Word taboo for names was the ban on pronouncing and writing the names of the emperor and his close relations, as well as his ancestors, particularly, his father, and the names of senior relations and persons of high ranks. For instance, as the emperor Gia Long's son's name was Nguyễn Phúc Cảnh, the word *cảnh* was tabooed. Therefore, *cây cảnh* "ornamental plant" was to be pronounced *cây kiểng*. Currently, the echoes of the ancient taboo are still lasting out: they avoid to give the ancestors' names to the babies.

Along with the development of society and language, there develop old, traditional themes of euphemization and emerge new ones. Also, there emerge new euphemisms. Thus, for example, there has emerged a current euphemism *hai vạch* "two stripes", positive pregnancy (Coronavirus) test, used for indirect naming pregnancy or the disease: *hai vạch ở tuổi 100*, two stripes (positive COVID test) at the age of 100; *ăn gì sau hai vạch?* – What to eat after the two stripes have emerged?

M.L. Kovshova writes that a current native speaker's desire "is not at all to secure oneself from the menacing forces of the fatal world; he merely knows an ethical code of cultural attitudes and uses a set of euphemisms to mitigate indecent, tactless, obscene or rude expression" [Kovshova 2007: 65].

### The functional types of euphemisms

There can be seen the following functional types of euphemisms in the current Vietnamese language:

1. Euphemisms-taboo words, used to substitute the names of frightful things and phenomena (death, deadly diseases, the elements etc.): *khuất núi* “to hide behind the mountains” – to die; *bệnh thế kỷ* “the disease of the century” – AIDS.

2. Euphemisms to substitute something obscene, indecent, or unpleasant (physiological processes, natural excretions, bodily bottom, sex, vices of society): *đeo ba lô ngược* “to bear a rucksack backwards” – to be pregnant; *giải quyết nỗi buồn* “to shake the blues” – to relieve oneself.

3. Etiquette euphemisms used not to hurt the collocutor or the third person, to show tolerance (human appearance, intelligence, poverty, nomination of low status job): *không được xinh lắm* “not pretty” – nasty, ugly; *tròn trịa* “in the flesh” – thick, full-bodied; *người giúp việc nhà (gia đình)* “au pair girl” – a housekeeper, a domestic worker.

4. Political euphemisms, used to mask or deform the substance of the case: *«chưa có công ăn việc làm»* “having no job, so far” – an unemployed.

5. Euphemisms in the function of a pun (wordplay) for the intended humorous effect. For instance, such a dialogue between the lovers: – *Em hai vạch rồi anh ạ. Ngắn người một lúc, chàng trai reo lên sung sướng: – Chúc mừng em lên trung sĩ nhé. Hôm nào phải khao anh đấy!* – I have got two stripes (i.e., positive pregnancy test). – The boy, slightly flabbergasted with the news, cried happily: – My congratulations, you are a sergeant now (there are two stripes on the sergeant’s shoulder-strap). You owe me for this!

### The fields of euphemizing

Numerous objects and nominative fields of euphemizing are similar in different languages (for example, death and diseases, supernatural phenomena, physical disabilities, gender relations etc.), but due to the existence of value priorities typical of a certain national culture, of different linguacultural and ethnolinguistic features, the qualitative and thematic content of euphemisms varies in different languages and reflects particularities of a certain linguistic culture. Thus, unlike Russian linguistic culture, in Vietnam middle age is not a subject of euphemizing. This is connected with the traditionally great respect for the experience and authority of the senior generation. Also, the theme of drunkenness is not relevant for euphemizing in Vietnamese. One of the specific themes in Vietnamese linguistic culture is childbearing. Traditionally after the childbirth the woman was settled out to a separate room, where the rest of family members were not allowed to enter. There was a hearth to warm the room. The woman ought to stay in bed, even hygienics being forbidden. Thus, emerged such euphemism like *nằm ổ* “to lie in the nest”, *nằm bếp* “to lie at the hearth”, to bear, to give birth. (*Chuẩn bị đi làm trở lại sau thời gian nằm ổ* – to be going to work after childbirth). Along with the development of language and society, there is the process of disappearance, change and emergence of euphemizing objects and corresponding nominations. Thus, if there used to exist traditionally positive attitude to corpulence being an indicator of prosperity and health in Vietnamese society, now obesity is evaluated negatively and often becomes a euphemizing object. Recently along with the globalization process and the spread of political correctness and tolerance tendencies, there emerge the like new euphemizing themes in different languages.

In Vietnamese linguistic culture there are two large fields of euphemizing: everyday-spoken and socio-political ones. Everyday-spoken field consists of the following euphemizing fields (themes): 1. Human anatomy and physiology, body parts nominations, the bodily bottom. For example: *chỗ ấy* “this part”, *cái ấy* “this thing”, *chỗ kín* “a private place” – genitals; *của quý* “valuables” – male genitals, *tam giác mật* “a secret triangle” – female genitals; *đèn đỏ* “the red light” – the period (*ngày đèn đỏ ở phụ nữ* – menstrual period); *có tin vui* “there is happy news” – pregnancy (*5 dấu hiệu khẳng định chị em có tin vui* – five signs of pregnancy).

2. Natural excretions: *đi WC, đi toilet* “to go to the toilet”; *bị Tào Tháo đuổi* “diarrhea” (Chinese military leader Tao Tháo is chasing somebody).

3. Sexual relations: *chuyện ấy* “this action”, *mây mưa* “clouds and rain” – sexual act; *làm tình* “to make love”.

4. Appearance, mental and physical defects and vices, mental disorders: *thâm thấp* “a little short”, *chiều cao khiêm tốn* “modest growth”, *đậm đà* “in the flesh”, *khiêm thính* “hearing impaired”.

5. Human vices, social evil, crimes: *ca ve* (from French: cavalière “she-partner”), *gái bán hoa* “a girl selling flowers” – a prostitute.

6. Financial situation, poverty, wealth: *con nhà có điều kiện* “a child from a family of conditions” – a child from a wealthy family.

7. Death, serious diseases: *đi rồi* “to leave”, *đi xa* “to leave (start) afar”, *đi đoàn tụ ông bà* “to join the ancestors” – to die.

8. Typical features, intellectual level: *chậm hiểu* “to understand slowly” – dull, stupid.

The second large group of euphemisms consists of euphemisms of the socio-political sphere. The function of these euphemisms is often masking (camouflage) of real essence of events, partial concealment of information, mitigating negative actions or events, frightful details. For example: *tình trạng thiếu việc làm* “job shortage” – unemployment; *kế hoạch hóa gia đình* “family planning” – birth control; *thủ tục đầu tiên* “primary formalities” – bribe; *văn hóa phong bì* “envelopes culture” – a custom to bribe; *điểm tụ nước* “spots of water accumulation” – the euphemism used by the administration of Ho Chi Minh City for direct nomination of floodings, flooded places and streets in the city, completely submerged after hard rains. Euphemisms are used to re-name so-called unprestigious jobs: *công nhân vệ sinh môi trường* “a worker for environmental hygiene” instead of a dustman.

### The modes and linguistic means to form euphemisms

In my opinion, the modes to form euphemisms can be divided into two large categories: structural (formal) and lexico-semantic ones.

Due to typological features of the Vietnamese language, being an isolating one, **structural (formal)** euphemizing modes are very scarce in it. The following can be discerned among them: a) **graphical omission**, i.e., the use of omission points in obscene, taboo words or in reduction, deformation of the word: *đ.m.* “...your mother”, *c.* “shit”; b) **abbreviation**: *người có H* “a person with AIDS, AIDS-positive”; c) the usage of **repeat-forms** with the meaning of mitigation, incompleteness of an action or a sign: *beo beo* “in the flesh” (instead of *béo*, thick, full-bodied), *thâm thấp* “a little short” (instead of *thấp*, short).

The great majority of Vietnamese euphemisms are formed in the **lexico-semantic** mode. The means to form euphemisms in the lexico-semantic mode are the following: a) the usage of **borrowed** lexical units. First of all, Vietnamese usually uses borrowed Han-Viet lexical units for euphemisms.



Numerous Han Viet lexical units belongs to pedantic style of speech and attach the phrase an official, academic, solemn phonation. Therefore, the usage of Han Viet units instead of originally Vietnamese ones is one of the means to euphemize, for example: *nội y* “underwear”, *tử thi* “dead body, corpse”, *hạ bộ* “male genitals”, *quan ngại* “sex addict, obsessed”. Currently, English borrowed words are often used for euphemisms: *toa-lét*, *WC* “toilet”, *nuy* “nude”, *die (đai)* “to die”, *làm tình* “to make love”; b) the usage of **proper names** for euphemisms. Thus, the Vietnamese euphemism of a housekeeper, a domestic worker is the widespread word *ô-sin*. Oshin (Shin) Tanokura is the name of the protagonist of a Japanese dorama, very popular in Vietnam. From her childhood Oshin had to be a domestic worker; c) the formation of **incompleteness** of a sign or an action with the negation (*không đẹp lắm* “not very pretty”, *không thông minh lắm* “not too intelligent”, *chưa được chăm chỉ* “not hard-working yet” – lazy), substitution with the word expressing the incompleteness of the action or a low degree of the quality (*kiếm thị* “a visually impaired” instead of “blind”, *đậm đà* “in the flesh” instead of “thick”); d) **pronominalization** (substitution with the pronoun): *chuyện ấy* “this action” – sexual intercourse; *chỗ ấy* “this place” – genitals. Usually, demonstrative pronouns are used instead of the forbidden, blaming nomination and mostly mask the phenomena connected with sex; e) **metaphorization** of the meaning: *đèn đỏ* “red light” – the period; *bướm* “a butterfly” – female genitals; *áo mưa* “raincoat” – a contraceptive; *bầu sữa* “milk vessel” – bosom, bust; *giấc ngủ ngàn thu* “eternal sleep” – death; f) **metonymic** transfer: *tắt thở* “to lose one’s breath” – to die; *lên giường* “to go to bed” – to have sex; g) the usage of **terminological** glossary: *bàng quang* (instead of *bóng đái* – bladder); h) the usage of the words with **diffused semantics** (certain, some etc.): *đàm phán đạt kết quả nhất định* – the negotiations brought certain results; i) **euphemistic circumlocution** – the nomination of a thing, a phenomenon, an event, or an action in a mitigated and veiled mode: *chuyến bay chưa đúng giờ* “the flight is not on time, so far”(instead of “delayed” or “canceled”); *đang ăn cơm tù rồi* “to have the prison food” – to be in prison; *buôn hương bán phấn* “to sell scent, to sell powder” – to prostitute oneself.

### Conclusion

Being a universal socio-cultural, linguistic and communicative phenomenon, euphemia is widely represented in the current Vietnamese language. Genetically, euphemia is closely connected with taboo, but in current society the formation and usage of euphemisms, usually, is not connected with taboo, but is due to social and moral norms and etiquette. In Vietnamese linguistic culture there are the following large fields of euphemization: everyday-spoken and socio- political ones. Functional types of euphemisms are the following: euphemisms-taboo words, used to substitute frightful objects and phenomena; euphemisms to substitute something obscene, indecent, unpleasant; etiquette euphemisms, political euphemisms; puns (wordplay) for an intended humorous effect. The great majority of Vietnamese euphemisms are formed in lexico-semantic mode, but structural (formal) euphemizing modes are scarce due to typological features of the Vietnamese language being an isolating one. Euphemisms are widespread in the current media and in Internet-communication. Therefore, the study of the phenomenon of euphemia in the current Vietnamese language is of practical relevance and significance.

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