

Eufemism as Representation of the Concept of “Harmony” in Japanese Society

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Abstract

Euphemism (*enkyoukuhyougen*) is one of the cultural characteristics of Japanese language. Its use is closely related to the concept of harmony (*wa*). Japanese people often use euphemisms when they want to say something that they feel could cause discomfort to other people. Through the use of euphemisms, conflict between individuals can be avoided. Apart from that, its use can also build smooth interpersonal relationships. This research aim to explain the use of euphemisms in electronic mail (E-mail) as a linguistic culture representing the concept of harmony in Japanese society. The data forms are clauses and expressions that contain euphemisms with illocutions: request, decline, inviting. This research is a qualitative descriptive research. Data was collected using library techniques and note-taking, while data analysis was conducted interactively. Based on the analysis, it is known that the characteristics of euphemisms in utterances containing the above illocutions are mostly indirect expressions accompanied by direct sentences that lead to the core of the intended problem in accordance with the TPO (time, place, occasion).

Keywords: Euphemism, *Enkyoukuhyougen*, Harmony, Illocution

1 Introduction

Language is closely related to the way of thinking of a nation. The Japanese people have valued their language since ancient times, and this is believed to be connected to the culture of rice cultivation. Farming cannot be done alone, so harmony is important. Japan also frequently experiences natural disasters, and everyone must unite and cooperate to face the difficulties resulting from such events. When everyone has to work together, it becomes unpleasant or tense if someone communicates or gives instructions in a commanding tone. Therefore, in such situations, euphemism (*enkyoukuhyougen*) is chosen as an expression to use when conveying something to the interlocutor politely and calmly, so as not to disturb harmony or offend the interlocutor’s feelings.

Several definitions of euphemism include Moelino and Apte via Darma Laksana [3], who state that euphemism is a milder expression used as a substitute for expressions perceived as unpleasant, embarrassing, or hurtful. It is very important to avoid expressions that could make the interlocutor angry, offended, hurt, annoyed, and so on, to avoid disrupting communication. Meanwhile, Lucas & Fike via Saito Hiroshi [2] state that euphemism is one of the oldest and most recognized forms of language in human history, and it is a word or phrase that is more polite compared to a literal expression. Another definition of euphemism is as a replacement for expressions that are offensive or suggest something unpleasant with expressions that are pleasant or harmless. [6]

From the above definitions, it can be concluded that euphemism is a refined expression used to replace expressions that might be perceived as insulting, offensive, or suggesting something unpleasant. Euphemism, as a communication phenomenon, is closely related to politeness. This is because the use of euphemism is a strategy to save face or maintain the dignity of the interlocutor. Therefore, this article will discuss politeness when someone makes a request (*negau*), decline (*kotowaru*), and invitation (*sasou*). These aspects indirectly represent the unique way of thinking of the Japanese people. When asking, demanding, or refusing something from others, the Japanese culture prefers to avoid direct expressions and strives to convey their intentions indirectly. The Japanese society is also known for frequently using euphemisms to maintain relationships. When expressing something that might cause discomfort to others, they try to use language that does not cause confrontation or conflict. The cultural philosophy underlying this communication strategy is known as the concept of “*wa*” or harmony. Hence, for learners of Japanese as a second language, understanding and learning euphemism becomes a crucial aspect of language acquisition.

Two previous studies that discuss euphemism in the Japanese language include a study by Nani & Djojok titled “Eufemisme dalam Bahasa Jepang” [4]. In their discussion, Nani and Djojok explain the markers of euphemism in Japanese found in words, phrases, clauses, and sentences. Another study on the theme of euphemism is titled “Penerjemahan Eufemisme dari bahasa Jepang ke dalam Bahasa Indonesia dalam Novel “Seibo” (The Holy Mother) karya Akiyoshi Rikako” [1]. The focus of this research is to describe the procedures for translating euphemism from Japanese into Indonesian in the novel “Seibo”. This research aim to explain the use of euphemisms in electronic mail (E-mail) as a linguistic culture representing the concept of harmony in Japanese society. Building on these two previous studies, this research will focus solely on sentences in Japanese electronic mail (E-mail) with the subjects of requesting help, declining, and inviting.

2 Methods

The data for this research are primary data, collected using purposive sampling. Data collection employed literature review and observation techniques. The primary data in this study is taken from a single data source Japanese textbooks containing e-mails with the subjects of requesting, refusing, and inviting. The data were analyzed interactively through the steps of data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions or verification.

3 Result and Discussion

The following are data on the use of euphemism in e-mails with the subjects of refusal, request, and invitation. From the sampling data, it is known that the use of euphemism in e-mail conversations with others generally occurs in the greetings and closing sentences, while other topics use direct expressions.

3.1 Requesting or Asking for Help

Data 1.

ローラです。
田中さんに、ちょっとお願いがあるんですが。
この間のゼミで話題になった論文のことなんですけど、田中さん、その論文が載っている「教育工学」34号を持っていると言っていましたよね。ぜひ読みたいんですが、貸していただけませんか。

Rōra desu.
"Tanaka-san ni, chotto onegai ga arundesuga. Kono aida no zemi de wadai ni natta ronbun no koto nandesukedo, Tanaka-san, sono ronbun ga notteiru 'Kyōiku Kōgaku' 34 yoshi o motteiru to itteimashitayone. Zehi yomitainesuga, kashite itadakemasenka?"

Rola.
"Mr. Tanaka, I have a small favor to ask. It's about the paper that was discussed in the seminar the other day. You mentioned that you have the 'Kyōiku Kōgaku' Volume 34 that contains that paper. I would really like to read it, so could you lend it to me?"

Fig. 1. E-mail with the subject: 「教育工学」34号を貸してください 'Please lend me the book titled 教育工学 edition 34'
[5]

The act of making a request places a burden on the interlocutor, thus necessitating the use of euphemism in the introductory sentence (first line) : 田中さんに、ちょっとお願いがあるんですが…。 'Mr. Tanaka, I have a request I would like to convey…' serves as a form of empathy towards the conversation partner. This euphemism is employed by the

speaker because, in Japanese culture, when making a request, it is expected to be done with consideration for the other person's feelings. Conversely, making a request sound direct or explicit is considered highly inappropriate. Another example of euphemism, reflecting respect (*kenjougo*), is found in the final line, 貸していただけませんか (*kashiteitadakemasenka*), which translates to 'Could you lend it to me?'

3.2 Refusal

Data 2.

韓国語に興味を持ってくださって、ありがとうございます。
できればお引き受けしたかったのですが、実は、この夏休みはグループ研究が忙しく、
余裕がない状況です。残念ですが、また機会があればと思います。今回は、申し訳あり
ません。

"Kankokugo ni kyōmi o mottekudasatte, arigatou gozaimasu. Dekireba ohiki ukeshitakatta no desuga, jitsu wa, kono natsu yasumi wa gurūpu kenkyū ga ishogashiku, yoyū ga nai jōkyō desu. Zannen desuga, mata kikai ga areba to omoimasu. Konkai wa, mōshiwake arimasen."

"Thank you for your interest in the Korean language. I would have liked to receive your guidance, but actually, this summer break is very busy with group research, and I don't have any free time. I'm sorry, but I hope there will be another opportunity. I apologize this time."

Fig. 2. E-mail with the subject : 韓国語家庭教師件 'About the Private Korean Language Tutor' [5]

With consideration to avoid hurting the interlocutor's feelings, Japanese speakers use more subtle methods to express refusal. In the data provided, the use of highly formal language and carefully constructed sentences demonstrates the speaker's intention to maintain the relationship and the feelings of the conversation partner. The email begins with an expression of gratitude, conveyed through the phrase 韓国語に興味を持ってくださって、ありがとうございます 'Thank you for your interest in the Korean language, Mr. Tanaka', and is followed by a statement of empathy, できればお引き受けしたかったのですが 'I would have liked to accept your request if possible'. Meanwhile, the use of euphemism for refusal appears in the third line: この夏やすみはグループ研究が忙しく、余裕がない状況です 'I am busy with group research this summer, so I do not have much free time'. Indirect refusal (euphemism) involving the engagement of another party (グループ研究, 'group research') is considered a safe approach to avoid offending the conversation partner.

3.3 Invitation

Data 3.

リーさん、こんにちは。
今日、留学センターの掲示板で見たんですが、21日に生協の食堂で「留学生パーティー」があるそうです。リナと行く約束をしたんですけど、リーさんも一緒に行きませんか。

"Rī-san, konnichiwa.
Kyō ryūgaku sentā no keijiban de mitandesuga, 21 nichi ni seikyō no shokudō de 'Ryūgakusei pāti' ga aru sou desu. Rina to iku yakusoku o shitandesukedo, Lee-san mo isshoni ikimasenka?"

"Hello, Mr. Lee.
I saw on the bulletin board of the study abroad center that there's a 'Student Party' at the cafeteria on the 21st. I promised to go with Rina, but would you like to join us too, Rii-san?"

Fig. 3. E-mail with the subject : 留学生パーティーへの誘う
'Invitation to an International Student Party' [5]

When inviting someone to an event, phrasing the invitation as a question is considered more polite than making a direct statement. Similarly, research by Nani and Djojok indicates that in Japanese society, using a negative form when inviting someone allows the conversation partner the opportunity to choose according to their preference [4]. The euphemism in the provided data is found in the final line: リーさんもいっしょに行きませんか (*Risan mo isshoni ikimasenka*) 'Would Mr. Lee also like to go with me?' In this instance, the speaker provides the conversation partner with an opportunity to decide.

From the analysis of the sample data above, it can be seen that in Japanese, direct statements are often avoided and indirect expressions are used, making euphemistic expressions an important grammatical item for learners of the Japanese language.

4 Conclusion

Euphemism, known in Japanese as *enkyoukuhyougen*, is a cultural norm in Japanese communication that facilitates interpersonal relationships by conveying direct expressions indirectly. Its usage reflects the speaker's empathy or consideration for the conversation partner. It is observed that to maintain societal harmony, Japanese individuals prefer to restrain themselves and choose indirect and subtle methods to express their true intentions rather than stating them explicitly. Data from sampling indicates that euphemisms in written language, such as in emails, are generally used in greetings and closing statements, while direct expressions are employed for other topics.

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