

**A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF DEATH-RELATED EUPHEMISTIC  
EXPRESSIONS IN ENGLISH USED BY NATIVE SPEAKERS  
AND PUNJABI L1 SPEAKERS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Euphemism is a linguistic lubricant aiming at reducing communicative friction. Some happenings are too sensitive to be expressed without linguistic safeguards i.e. euphemisms. Death is, undoubtedly, one of such happenings which have been taboos since time immemorial. This thesis attempts to make a comparative analysis of the use of death euphemism in English by native English speakers and the Punjabi L1 speakers, well versed in English language. The study also encompasses whether education plays a significant role in the use of euphemistic expressions for death and dying. The hypothesis under investigation is that ‘native English speakers use less euphemistic expressions for death in comparison with Punjabi L1 speakers’. The research is quantitative in approach and descriptive in nature. The population consists of native English speakers across the globe and Punjabi L1 speakers well versed in English language. The sample comprises 34 respondents in each case. The researcher has used random sampling technique. A questionnaire, containing 15 items, has been used to gather data. The study explores that Punjabi L1 speakers, while communicating in English language, are more prone to using euphemistic expressions for death than the native English speakers.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 Background

Euphemism is a common phenomenon in all languages. Euphemism means the use of inoffensive, mild, or indirect expression in place of one which is thought to be offensive, harsh or embarrassing. It is the substitution of an agreeable or pleasant word or term for a blasphemous or a taboo term. Euphemistic terms are typically used to replace expressions to do with death, sex, bodily functions and organizational restructuring. For instance, it is more agreeable to use 'pass away' in place of 'die', 'rest room' in place of 'toilet', 'private parts' in place of 'sexual organs' and 'laid off' in place of 'fired'.

The word 'euphemism' may be considered as an antonym to 'taboo' because in almost all cultures there are certain things strongly forbidden by social customs i.e. taboos. Generally people try to avoid mentioning taboos directly. When the taboos (the forbidden things) have to be referred to, it is likely that people are inclined to use substitute expressions that sound pleasant. Euphemisms are found in almost every language. Burchfield (1985) says, "A language without euphemisms would be a defective instrument of communication." The universal existence of euphemism in languages does not mean that euphemisms are identical in different languages. They have close relevance to culture.

This study tends to make a comparative analysis of death euphemism in English between native speakers and non-native Punjabi L1 speakers. Some topics or happenings are too sensitive to be mentioned without linguistic safeguards. Death is, undoubtedly, one of such topics. Death euphemism, which plays a vital role in language, is an important component of euphemism. Since everyone is destined to die, people tend to use tactful language such as 'to return to heaven' 'to join the immortals' 'to join the majority' 'to push up the daisies' instead of mentioning the word 'death'. Apart from being polite, people believe that they can avoid disaster in case of not uttering the word 'death'. The place for the dead to sleep forever is called graveyard. However, people are reluctant to use this word, for it sounds too horrible and indifferent to discard the bodies of their near and dear ones in such a deserted and damp

place. Recently, in place of ‘graveyard’, people begin to use such euphemisms as ‘funeral house’ or ‘memorial park’ since the words ‘home’ and ‘park’ are more humane with some cosy and tranquil implications.

Man’s inability to reconcile with death has been prevalent since time immemorial. Actually, human beings have been far from being receptive to deal with the subject of death by using straight-forward terms. Whether owing to superstitions, fear, social respect, or intellectual snobbery, the fact remains that when describing death, language-users try to soften the effects of what they really wish to communicate. Therefore, they resort to linguistic safeguards i.e. euphemisms. Euphemisms are powerful linguistic devices which “are embedded so deeply in our language that few of us, even those who pride themselves on being plainspoken, ever get through a day without using them.” (Rawson,1981).

Euphemism has been a favourite research area in English speaking cultures because of its rampant use in language. A number of significant works were produced on euphemism, which allured researchers to do further research in this domain. In 1919, in his book *The American Language*, American linguist, Mencken, discussed in detail why hundreds of euphemisms had been born and become popular on the basis of American history and cultural background. His book is a significant resource in the study of euphemism. In 1981, Hugh Rawson, a British linguist brought out *A Dictionary of Euphemisms and Other Double Talks*, which encompasses the major research outputs on euphemism by British and American researchers. In the preface, Hugh Rawson not only outlined the evolution of euphemism, but also detailed its salient features. In 1983, Neamen and Silver compiled *Kind Words—A Thesaurus of Euphemisms*. It proved to be a milestone in the study of euphemism. In 1985, Enright brought out an anthology of essays on euphemism, *The Uses of Euphemism*, in which some specific topics like media and euphemism, children and euphemism, and sex and euphemism, etc. were discussed. Robert Burchfield (1985) asserts the universal existence of euphemisms in all languages. He claims that a language sans euphemism is a defective means of communication. In 1991, Allan and Burridge published the book *Euphemism and Dysphemism: Language used as Shield and Weapon*, in which an interesting perspective on the human psyche is to be gained from the study of euphemism used as a protective shield against the anger or disapproval of natural or supernatural beings. This book is of great significance to the study of English Euphemisms from the pragmatic perspective. In 2006,