The features of english political euphemism

. IntroductionEuphemism, a common phenomenon in human language use, has attracted much attention home and abroad. With thearrival of foreign linguistic theories in China since 1980s, Chinese scholars have published a large number of essays andbooks which focus on euphemism from different perspectives and systematically summarize the causes of its production, way of composition, classification, and pragmatic principles of composition as well as its social functions. (Shu, 1995, p17; Liu, 2000, p36) Actually, political euphemism has always been a point of penetration for foreign political linguiststo evaluate and criticize political discourse. In the recent years, with the establishment of the selected Englishnewspaper reading course in many Chinese colleges, English political euphemism began to attract people??™s attention. However, it is mainly confined to its disguising function (Pan, 2004, p85), leaving its influences on people??™s thoughtsand ideology untouched.

This paper begins with an analysis on the features of political euphemism and explores its twomain social functions— disguising or cheating function and persuasive function with Austin??™s Speech Act Theory. Overall, this paper aims at further revealing the essential features of political euphemism, expanding people??™s vision ineuphemism and revealing the relationship among language, thought and existence to some extent. 2. Features of Political EuphemismEuphemism is defined in different ways from the perspectives of pragmatics and style: Hongrui Wen (2002) oncequoted several representative definitions, which have it in common that euphemism is a replacement of ordinaryexpressions with propitious or exaggerated ones. Political euphemism is created in political life and serves politicalpurposes.

Generally speaking, it is a tool for political participants to hide scandals, disguise the truth, guide publicthoughts when discussing social issues or events. In spite of some common features political euphemism shares withothers, it has three typical features.

2. 1 Greater Degree of Deviation from its SignifiedAccording to Swiss linguist Saussure, language signs are a combination of the signifier, the phonetic forms of languageand the signified, objects in existence represented by linguistic forms. Due to the lack of direct or logical relationsbetween the two, they have a discretionary relationship with each other, making it possible to create euphemism byreplacing the signifier. Because euphemism is just created by transforming the signifier to enlarge the associationdistance between the signifier and the signified, euphemism meanings stay relative to their former zero-degree ones (Xu, 2002, p7). Although euphemism and its former zero-degree signifier refer to the same signified, political euphemism isdifferent from those commonly used euphemistic forms in order to avoid death and other physical phenomena in that itdeviates greatly from the meaning expressed by its former signifier, or even a complete distortion. For example, FormerUS President Reagan once named the 10-warhead intermediate-range missile as ??? peacekeeper???; some later political118E-mail: English Language TeachingMarch, 2010participants named their attack as ??? active defense???; they even replaced ??? recession??? with ??? negative growth??? because itsounded offensive to the ear. It is quite obvious that these expressions are not a simple replacement of the formerzero-degree signifier, but quite opposite meanings to their literal meanings, just like replacing ??? black??? with ??? white???.

Wemight as well mark euphemism??™s deviation degree with a range from 1 to 10, within which a greater number refers to agreater degree of deviation. In this case, the above mentioned political euphemism expressions should be marked with10 while some ordinary expressions such as ??? overweight??? and ??? fat??? can only be marked as 1. 2. 2 More Vague MeaningsGeorge Owell pointed out two characteristics of political discourse in Politics and the English Language (1946), that is, the obsolescence and vagueness of figure of speech. Euphemism, characterized by replacing direct expressions withimplicative, obscure and vague ones, plays a quite essential role in demystifying the connotation of political discoursewhen serving political purposes. Some commonly employed demystifying methods in political euphemism includereplacing specific meanings with general ones, replacing hyponyms with superordinates and replacing derogatorymeanings with neutral or even commendatory ones.

For instance, people often refer to the atomic bombs used inHiroshima as ??? the gadget???, ??? the device???, ??? the thing??? or other vague meanings. When talking about American army??™sinvasion into Grenada in 1983, President Reagan was quite dissatisfied with the word ??? invasion??? used by the journalists, instead, he expressed it as ??? a rescue mission???, glorifying their military invasion as their help offer to other countries. Similarly, US air attacks in Vietnam and Libya were called ??? air operation; President Bush also glorifying their militaryattack to Iraq with some neutral and general expressions such as ??? military operation??? or ??? disarm??? in this speechdelivered on the very day they made war against Iraq in 2003. 2.

3 Strong Characteristic of TimesEuphemism is the language reflection of Social culture, (Peng, 1999.

p66) therefore changes in social development willpropel those in language. In each international vicissitude, political euphemism will be booming. Due to US??™s importantrole in international politics as well as its dynamic domestic politics and economy, rich soil is provided for the creationof political euphemism.

For example, from US economic decline are ??? recession???, ??? disinflation??? and ??? negative growth??? created, hence giving birth to some euphemistic expressions such as ??? downsize??? or ??? workforce adjustment???. AfterWatergate Scandal, quite a few euphemistic expressions were produced to hide such political scandal. In addition, military actions are also an extension from politics. It is said that war has brought about not only death and destructionbut new euphemistic expressions because they will make death sound less horrible (Page, 2003). US Department ofDefense named their air attack in Vietnam as ??? air support??? and ??? protective action???, their destruction over Vietnamesevillages as ??? pacification program??? and those homeless refugees as ??? ambient non-combat personnel. Similarly, deathsand injuries caused by their bombardment over other nations were expressed as ??? collateral damage???. It is no wonderthat English Teachers??™ Council of US once awarded the Best Political Euphemism Award to its Department of Defense.

Besides, its characteristic of times can also be reflected in the variation in the signifier of the same objectivephenomenon with time. Let??™s take the

different euphemisms of military attack in different periods as an example. In1950s, Truman described Korean War as ??? police action???; in 1960s and 1970s, Vietnam War was called ??? VietnamConflict??? by US; in 1983, US invasion into Grenada was said to be ??? a rescue mission??? instead of ??? incursion???; itsinvasion into Panama was also called ??? Operation Just Cause??? and Bush Government said Iraqi War beginning in March, 2003 as ??? Operation Iraqi Freedom???.

Inside the language system, such constant changes with time evolve from the relationship between the signifier andsignified mentioned in 2. 1. Although there is no relation between linguistic signs and their signified, people tend torelate euphemism to its signified after it has been used for a period. As a result, the former vagueness and sense ofdistance disappear and euphemistic color fades away. Consequently, politicians will rack their brains to find alternativeexpressions. However, the production of a large number of political euphemisms can find its root in profound socialreasons, which will be analyzed in two aspects as follows: 3.

Social Functions of Political Euphemism3. 1 Speech Act Theory and Social Functions of Political EuphemismIt is shown in the above analysis that political euphemism is different from others expressing physical phenomena orused in other fields such as in career because it is equipped with obvious political language characteristics. Actually, political language is neither romantic as literature nor precise as that in foreign trade, but purpose-oriented (Tian, 2002. p24). In the following part, let??™s look at how political euphemism performs illocutionary act and perlocutionary act withAustin??™s Speech Act Theory. Austin claims that speech performs three speech acts

simultaneously, including locutionaryact, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act (He, 1997, pp85-86). This theory provides theoretical support for us toreveal the social functions of political euphemism.

However, with individual listeners as his subject, Austin mainlyfocused his attention on the function of speech act verbs in the three levels of speech act. Here in this paper, we try toanalyze this linguistic phenomenon from a wider perspective with political leaders (including governmental officials119 Vol. 3, No. 1English Language Teachingserving them) and public people as the two sides of the communication.

We find that implication is an important part ofeuphemism in addition to its narrative and signified functions. 3. 2 Illocutionary Act— Political Euphemism??™s Disguising and Deceptive FunctionPolitical euphemism is an effective tool for political leaders to control the quantity and quality of informationtransmission, with which some disgraceful behaviors or motivations will be glorified or hidden, hence avoiding publicaccusal. For example, US Ex-President Nixon and his partners called their overhearing spying in Watergate Scandal as??? intelligence gathering??? and their lie telling as ??? less than truthful??? and ??? prevaricate???. Obviously, such trivializedexpression is to smooth out the bad influences they have exerted. US Government once expressed their nuclearexperiment in South Pacific as ??? operation sunshine???.

It is widely known that atomic bomb experiments are mainlyintended to test the extensiveness and effectiveness of its execution, but such a euphemistic name hides their nature. It isimpossible for people who are uninformed of it

to associate such a beautiful name with terrible nuclear weapon. In thereports about US military attacks to other nations in recent years, people hardly find expressions as ??? surprise attack???. Instead, some other expressions such as ??? preemptive strikes??? or ??? surgical strikes??? are employed to add a color of justice. Actually, all these are defensive expressions to hide their illegal attack to others. It doesn??™t go far to compare politicians to euphemism masters because they skillfully deliver their lies with their ownlanguage.

2500 years ago, Chinese militarist Sunzi summarized military behaviors as ??? nothing is too deceitful in war???, which seems also adaptable to politicians. George Orwell (1946) pointed out straightforwardly that political languagewas designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable. 3. 3 Perlocutionary Act—Political Euphemism??™s Persuasive FunctionLakoff (1990) claims that politics is language and language is politics. Political euphemism is similar to politicalpropaganda in that both aim at persuading and influencing the public.

It has been a long time since linguists realizedlanguage is not only for ideogram or reflecting social culture but for participating social events and constructing socialrelationship. Actually, it is a kind of social practice and an intervention. Based on the above facts, Berger and Luckmann(1967) have long before pointed out the important role of language in the construction of social reality. Although itdoesn??™t change the signified things in existence, it really changes its conceptual connotation because sometimespeople??™s learning of a concept or a meaning is based on their knowledge about words (Hudson, 2000, pp92-93). Political leaders try to shape people??™s

recognition and knowledge of the world with the use of euphemism, henceinfluencing their view of world and intervening their knowledge of the world and sense of right and wrong. It is stated by critical linguists that language is not a true reflection of reality. While helping people to know about theobjective world, language also imposes on them a set of extremely subjective classification on behalf of their groupinterests, which is often used to deceive people without detection (Dong, 2000, p25). The influences exerted by politicaleuphemism are not immediate but subtle and potential, hence planting illusive concepts into people??™s minds andchanging them into facts accepted by these people.

4. ConclusionPolitical euphemism is not just a simple rhetoric replacement of the former zero-degree signifier. Instead, it has somespecial characteristics which distinguish it with euphemistic expressions in other fields.

Its production reflects politicalleaders??™ motivation to hide the truth and shift public attention off it. By using such expression, they attempt to controlpeople??™s learning about the world as well as information transmission. Therefore, when reading political discourse, weshould be alert to some potential political purposes hidden in euphemism.

Especially in some courses such as selectedEnglish newspaper reading, some analyses on political euphemism should be made to enhance students??™ capacity inunderstanding newspapers, improve their appreciation ability of English and learn about the way that language servepolitical purposes. ReferencesAustin, J L. (2002). How to Do Things with

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