



REVISTA

CÁTEDRA

Tabú y eufemismo: las formas del habla en la sociedad quiteña actual

Taboo and euphemism: the forms of speech in modern Quito society

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(Received on: 13/08/2018; Accepted on: 28/08/2018; Final version received on: 25/09/2018)

Suggested citation: Escobar-Miño A. (2018). Taboo and euphemism: the forms of speech in modern Quito society. *Revista Cátedra*, 1(1), 129-139.

Resumen

Las palabras además de cambiar en su forma externa también lo hacen en su significado, el tabú y el eufemismo son dos conceptos que forman parte de ese cambio semántico que se presenta en el acto comunicativo. Ese cambio obedece a factores procedentes de una sensibilidad social en determinada época y circunstancia. Su uso es común en todos los medios sociales, así se evita llamar a las cosas por su nombre.

El presente artículo tiene por objetivo describir algunos eufemismos usados en la ciudad de Quito. Se demuestra a través de una investigación descriptiva si tales formas están vigentes o han cambiado en los últimos años. Además, se determinará los factores que definen su uso.

Mediante un estudio gramático y pragmático se realizará la descripción sociológica de la población, los enunciados que estos profieren para contrastar con variables sociales seleccionadas. Se detallarán también las diversas circunstancias y espacios en los que los eufemismos concurren en la comunicación y cómo éstos se presentan como una herencia de la colonización. Su análisis permitirá comprender y valorar la cultura heredada.



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Revista Cátedra, 1(1), pp. 129-139, september-december 2018. e-ISSN: 2631-2875

<https://doi.org/10.29166/catedra.v1i1.769>

Palabras clave

Eufemismo, Quito, significado, tabú.

Abstract

Words, in addition to changing their external form, also change their meaning, taboo and euphemism are two concepts that are part of that change of meaning that occurs in the communication act. That change obeys to factors coming from a social sensibility in certain times and circumstance. Its use is common on all social media, in order to avoid naming things.

The objective of this article is to describe some euphemisms used in Quito. The aim is to demonstrate through a descriptive research if such forms have been in use for a long time or if they have changed in the last years. Besides, the different factors that define their use are determined.

Grammar and pragmatics help to analyze the sociolinguistic study of the population, as well as the discourse used to contrast the selected social variables. Additionally, the different circumstances and spaces in which euphemisms are used are detailed as well as the way these present as a colonization heritage. This analysis will allow understanding and valuing the inherited culture.

Keywords

Euphemism, meaning, Quito, taboo.

1. Introduction

The use and value of euphemisms in the speech of Quito is described in this manuscript. A descriptive analysis will be carried out with a labelling of the words considered taboo and their replacement by other forms that in semantics constitute a study on the different changes of meaning that undergo lexical constructions in certain contexts. First, an analysis of the pragmatic phenomenon is carried out in order to understand the intentionality and attitude of the Quiteño speaker in various contexts, as well as the explanation and the value that is given to the use of different forms, in order to collect and to give them the acquired sense to elaborate a lexicographical work.

Secondly, a brief description of the historical evolution process in the use of the Spanish language in Quito is included, with the purpose of being able to understand the treatment of the taboo in this context. In addition, the idea is to explain the use mechanism of the euphemistic forms to locate verbal forms, nominal, phrases and more elements of the norm, and to match them with the new constructions that have arisen and have become part of the daily lexicon. Examples of taboo and euphemism used in daily speech in Quito are detailed.

Thirdly, the different areas in which the euphemisms have emerged from a sociological point of view have been explained to rescue the identity, to collect the uses in a list of Quito euphemisms, and also to set guidelines to continue with deeper research that leads to understanding the reason of the different uses of lexical constructions in the Quito Society. "In spite of the repeated alerts of some researchers on the importance of the taboo study from the sociolinguistic point of view, the bibliography on the subject remains being almost nulled" (Calvo, 2011, p. 11). Indeed, it is difficult to achieve an empowerment and then a social analysis in an environment other than its own.



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The relationship between language, society and culture is close and necessary when elaborating a study; the analysis based on the sociolinguistic approach will determine the context in which the communicative interaction occurs. The objective is to understand how society is formed on the basis of linguistic experiences.

1.1 Argumentation

In social relations and interrelations, communication plays an essential role. This process is concretized differently, among which oral communication through verbal codes creates the transmission of messages according to individual and collective needs.

Since communication is a cultural element, it uses multiple ways to refer to contextual elements directly and indirectly; in some cases, the practice to deal with content that denotes allusions and inappropriate insinuations is observed; terms that sound unpleasant but are necessary because these grant cultural identity. In this regards, Brown (2015) states:

Superficially perhaps this seems as an advancement for humanity, but if we examine the role of the taboo in the structure of a society we realize that it is a necessary cultural stabilizer, an integral element of all cultures, not only those that we call "primitives" (Brown, 2015, p. 10).

The author refers to a cultural stabilizer, i.e., it is a linguistic phenomenon necessary to identify and locate the culture of people or a nation. It may be thought that the use of certain euphemisms constitutes a delay; however, the identity, the folklore of a certain social group is rescued. Our ways of speaking reveal our idiosyncrasy, our worldview of the world.

In the Ecuadorian society, euphemisms are used to replace terms considered taboo, which are seen as unacceptable and denote an immoral behavior. This categorization depends on the social hierarchy. Domínguez (2014) says:

For anthropology, the taboo is related to objects and actions that have an essential meaning in a certain social hierarchy. Hence, the importance of the leaders and religious objects or the prohibitions imposed on totemic animals that are an integral part of the symbolic structure of society. (Domínguez, 2014, p. 45).

Indeed, symbolism of a society is based on the degree of social hierarchy of a particular group; therefore, the more diverse the socio-economic and cultural level, the more different the range of turns and expressions that each group will use. The social fact cannot separate from language.

Our idiosyncrasy, the product of a tragic cultural inheritance derived from colonization, keeps a subordinate language, which is doubtfully and fearful of negative reactions of the speaker. This leads to the use of terms called moderate or less strong in order to have a sort of diplomatic attitude in the discourse, not to hurt people's susceptibility, not to make requests that sound to imposition. The words taboos are replaced by the euphemisms in the media, in work environments, in the treatment of diseases, familiar environments, also in the political field to persuade, to convince and also to cover acts.



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1.2 Definition

The degree of sequence and reciprocity that arises in the substitution process of one to another is clearly established in the taboo and euphemism; then, the lexical substitutions from determining aspects are analyzed, such as the cultural context, speakers, discourse, type of register and communicative intention in the speech acts. That is the reason there is duality in language.

Certainly, this dualistic phenomenon has on its structures social, pragmatic, and logical aspects. The mechanism of the euphemism cannot be studied only as a linguistic fact but as a complex cultural and sensitive phenomenon to extralinguistic changes that requires an interdisciplinary approach.

In accordance with the previous text, it is possible to confirm the importance of conducting an analysis from the process of using the levels and records of the language in which the speakers are located. Its cultural, spatial and physical context will vary in relation to the criteria, perceptions, ideologies and other agents.

According to the semantics, euphemisms replace taboo words, these are words that are socially not accepted and sound unpleasant in the communicative process. Euphemisms that substitute taboo words will not cause any problem or uncomfortable moment among the listener, since the purpose of the language is the social coexistence.

Regarding euphemisms, it is said that this is a daily strategy of the language which can be socially compromising. That is, the fact of transmitting implicit messages can lead to misunderstandings and generate difficulties. In this sense, euphemisms affect good communication, in some cases offending the listeners and in others distorting consciously and unconsciously what they want to communicate, which is mediated by interests and the motivations of the speaker.

2. Origin of the Ecuador euphemism

Our cultural heritage is the product of a brutal colonization where a group of invaders that have subjugated for years ancestral ethnicities, without allowing them to express themselves freely in different aspects. The slave to address his boss could not call him by the name but instead should have said "master" or "Amito" and not because he felt some affection, but by fear of being punished.

The colonizers forced our natives to learn the Spanish language, however, the Spaniards did not know the language of our natives; so these could insult the Spaniards in kichwa, and those euphemisms remained and were transmitted from generation to generation.

The subordinate language appears from this cultural subjugation inheritance, and transforms into euphemisms as a tool of social coexistence and is evident in statements like: *no sea malito*, *mande*, *regáleme un poquito*, *esto no más*, and are maintained repeatedly in Quito. The intention is to express cordiality, consideration, respect, as it was the way to treat the master.

Another way is the use of the derivative morpheme suffix *ito-ita*, at the time of asking for a favor, *"espéreme un minutito"*. *"Ya le sirvo la comida"*, *"Cuántos platitos le sirvo"*, *"deme una manito"*, *"quiero el amarillito"*, *"en la tardecita"*, *"aquisito no más"*, *"un favorcito"*, in these examples there is a certain intentionality and an eagerness to disguise their feelings, their emotional state and above all these pursue an end which is persuading. There is the need to



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replace a strong term with a soft one, since at the beginning they assume a sense of submission to obtain a sort of subordination and servitude.

3. Why using euphemisms?

The euphemisms are linguistic tools of social use that is generalized. For example, in the political discourse, the term “disappeared” is used to cover murders of people who opposed a regime of dictatorships or oppressive governments. Hence, talking about murder is talking about the truth which is not convenient for many.

“The budget cut”, “the fall in the price of oil”, “the worst earthquake in recent years” disguise and hide the real crisis in which the country is. “Accreditation of the University” is a perfect label and a source of concern for professors, who in their attempt to achieve it have time in the classroom to generate formats, reports, evidence. They are crammed with imposed activities, knowing that the goal is to divert and evade perhaps a difficult reality.

The students who for the sake of their rights forget their duties and disrespect the rules of academic coexistence are called “hyper”, “special case” and should not be called them undisciplined to avoid hurting their susceptibility or lower their esteem and avoid possible suicide.

“Sex workers” get more consideration today because they are no longer called prostitutes. And black have claimed their rights because they are people of color. As if the idea of discrimination was not implicit in the same fact of not calling black, as well as white and mestizo.

And for the workers not to feel exploited nor violated in their rights, they will not be told that are fired, but that there will be a readjustment at work, a budget cut or that a reengineering labor will be made. The construction workers will say I have a “*chauchita*” which means extra work. And they will express in a subordinate and pleading way: “*dará trabajito*”, “*dé trabajito*”, to apply for a job.

In the field of medicine, euphemisms are used to make less painful and bearable certain disease. The name of the disability or the disease is not mentioned, instead the terms *long disease*, *blind*, *disabled*, *special abilities* are used because it is believed that pronouncing them in their original form is somehow excluding or discriminatory, which in the case of medicine, generates confusion and an absence of total and real knowledge to be able to act in case of emergency.

If we try to carry out an analysis of military discourse and, specifically of Ecuadorian military discourse, we soon realize that one of the structuring features of this discourse is the recourse to the euphemism and to the use of words to a greater or lesser extent, mostly due to the position that the army occupies in some sectors of society as an institution close to war, fighting, bloodshed or death (Hernandez, 2001, p.8).

There are many euphemisms in the military field because of the complexity of this activity and the feeling of pain that it can cause in their relatives if they receive bad news by the loss of one of the companions.

In *Rambo: First Blood* (1982), Delmar Barry’s wife (former Vietnam fighter) uses a characteristic euphemism, “-Delmar left – And what time will he come back? He died in



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summer". In this type of film, known and appreciated worldwide, euphemisms are heard, and need to be used because the topic is death in order to attenuate the pain caused.

Euphemistic terms are used in the family nucleus because parents generate taboo topics related to sexuality. Gay is said instead of homosexual; it is said "the stork" brought the baby to the fact of giving birth; other denominations are given to reproductive organs such as penis and vagina, *pollito and pollita*, respectively; sexual relations by intimate relationships, "la regla" instead of menstruation.

In the Quito speech, pleasant, friendly and even affectionate terms and expressions are used, as a reflection of the cultural and ancestral heritage. The Andean culture always keep a friendly relationship, reason for which diminutives, gerunds, quichuismos, idioms are employed, always with intentionality of harmonious and pleasant coexistence. However, there is also intentionality such as persuasion and conviction in the speech of Quito; in the psychological and affective aspect the intention is not to injure susceptibility; and in other cases the idea is to hide the truth. Iván Sandoval Carrión (2014) from El Universo newspaper, affirms:

A universal example is the extended use of the term "Afro descendant" instead of "black." Their employment is inadequate, because "afro descendants" are all human beings, if we grant credence to Leakey's investigations, who found the oldest traces of hominids and Homo sapiens on the plains of what is now called Kenya and Tanzania. In addition, the word does not specify whether these are descendants of the people that are in the north or south of the Sahara, and that differ considerably among themselves in their languages and other cultural traits, in addition to the color of their skin. In our case, would it not be more "correct" to ask the Ecuadorians who inhabit the province of Esmeraldas and north of Imbabura how they prefer to be called? Maybe they are proud to be considered black. (p. 11).

When the political discourse makes reference to "el negro de mi patria", the word black is not a taboo, it is not unpleasant, and maybe the intention is to cause affability and gain acceptance in the group. When reference is made to "Negro" of emeralds, whose qualities of strong man, wrestler and cheerful have always characterized him, it is cause of pride in the ethnic diversity; however, in the political discourse with the intention to persuade to obtain votes, the word black is used because is a symbol of pride, and this is where the cultural, contextual and intentional aspect prevail.

However, it is not only in the economic and political sphere where the terms considered taboo are being replaced by euphemisms, it also happens in the cultural and social sphere, in which to be accepted in the group they are forced to use multiple forms of expression. Such is the case of the military environment that was detailed in the preceding paragraph.

4. Some taboo words with their corresponding euphemisms in the speech of Quito

The following examples are normally heard in the speech of Quito, in different working and common contexts. I need some time instead of "I want to end this relationship"; you deserve someone better than me for "I don't want to be with you"; social rehabilitation center for "prison", deprived of liberty by "prisoner", "imprisoned"; severe labor dispute for "dismissal"; to consummate marriage by "sexual act"; economic slowdown by "crisis"; divert



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funds by “embezzlement”; voluntary termination of pregnancy by “abortion”; not to graceful by “ugly”; improper relationships for “adultery”; military pronouncement by “coup d'etat”; elderly for “old age”, sleep the eternal dream by “dying”; a little overweight for “fat”; is not technology-friendly by “doesn't know how to use technology”.

4.1 Cases of euphemisms: combination of the verb “give” plus a gerund

It is very common to hear the following terms in Quito with the intention of not imposing or ordering at the time of soliciting or asking for something, the verb is not frequently used in imperative, it is not said “trae la caetera” but “dame trayendo la cartera”, a “dame” will never stand alone, because there is a need to accompany it with a gerund to soften it.

4.2 Other forms of euphemisms

In order not to denote imposition, it is not said “haz esto o aquello”, but instead the structure of the verb *dar* + GER is used: “dame hacienda”.

The following terms were found in the book “Quiteñismos” (Allan Garcia, 2016, p. 21):

Dame viendo a María (=look for Mary)

Darás viendo a María

Deme viendo a María

Dame cuidando a la guagua. (=Take care of it)

Dame dando (= give something for me)

Dame dando el libro que está sobre la mesa.

Dame hablando (=Intercede for me)

Dame hablando con la profesora para que me reciba la tarea.

Dame dando una mano (=help me)

Another type of euphemism consists on substituting one verb for another, in order to deal with subtlety or to soften the discourse.

Mi mamá le habló porque llegó tarde del colegio (“talk” instead of “scolding”)

And when people do not accept that they want to leave they say “me van llevando”

Me van llevando a la fiesta.

Me van llevando a la reunión.

If we compared our euphemisms with those used in the Colombian language, it is observed that this prototype of euphemisms does not occur, since the Incas did not arrive there, i.e., they did not live a large subjugation process of the Spaniards. There was no resistance of the Incas during the Spanish conquest, so in the Colombian speech the petitions are direct, the Colombian will say “bring the documents”, the Ecuadorian will say “dame trayendo los documentos”. Therefore, the marked submission attitude in the Quito population is seen in the use of euphemisms.

In Ecuador, the word ass is taboo and is replaced by buttocks; in Spain is a completely normal word. Hence it is even used as a verbal derivative in “going backwards”. The euphemism “rabitó” is often incomprehensible for a Spaniard when he/she first hears it.

Are euphemisms in the speech of our society really used to avoid an unpleasant moment? Is there a purpose to cause aesthetic delight in the ear? Or do we cover the truth, manipulate and make use of the characteristics of the language's appealing function to influence the listener? We disguise the truth; we divert the true intentions of the one who makes use of this semantic phenomenon. We have rooted the feeling of submission, of oppression and we do not want to repeat history, reason for which we seek a lexicon substitution.



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The lack of academic instruction is a problem when interpreting a message objectively. It is easy to be prey on deceit and manipulation, as it expresses a nice speech in which the truth is not presented, because that message, laden with euphemisms, offers a different view to the real.

The euphemism is created by the speaker. There are several characteristic factors to create a euphemism, like worldview of the world, culture, social position. The understanding of the euphemism depends on the context of the communicative act, and above all, that both the speaker and the listener share certain social uses and convictions. Therefore, information that for a social, religious and political group has a pejorative or unpleasant meaning, may be different for another group.

Euphemisms are not exotic and strange creatures from distant lands, nor are they private property of literature or national politics; they are part of our daily living. As a rhetorical figure, the euphemism is not inconsequential. It is a figure with intentionality and a distraction from that intentionality. Like the magician who hides the "secret" of his act (Morales, 2005, p. 16).

In the pragmatic field, when the aim is to stand the use of language in relation to the users and the circumstances of communication, the attitude of the speaker is another determining factor in the use of euphemisms, if the person wishes to persuade, or offer affability or discretion; or eliminate that sense of oppression and resignation.

It mainly depends on the culture, the circumstances and the social group in which the speaker is to determine if a word is taboo, euphemism or dysphemisms. The taboo is a social phenomenon that is in the daily action, and is immersed in a social group in which it is necessary to intervene and to express criteria on certain subject, taking care that the discourse is accepted in the group and is looking for the term that is best associated and that wants to be expressed.

However, there are doubts about if a term is a taboo, because it could be a taboo for someone and for others it may not be, what for one person is a euphemism for another is not, the fact of issuing an ideological pronouncement, religious and sexual in a group leads to the use of euphemisms. Now the interesting thing is that these euphemisms could be taboo for another group and thus generate a heterogeneous chain of changes and lexical substitutions.

Euphemism carries out several relevant social functions that differ from metaphors (Domínguez, 2004, p. 38). Its main function is obviously to be able to name an unpleasant object or the nasty effects of an object. But, in addition to this main function, the euphemism conveys other minor functions, as it is also used to be polite or respectful, my wife or my husband for "mi mujer" or "mi marido", respectively.

It is also used to dignify a profession or trade: bartender for "waiter"; chef for "head of the Kitchen"; cabin crew member, flight attendant for "stewardess"; technical engineer for "perito", etc. Some of the euphemisms quoted are loans, especially when the words taken as loans come from languages that are considered to be prestigious, more educated, refined or elegant.

To dignify a person who suffers from sickness, disability or a painful situation, it is said "padecer/sufrir el síndrome de Down" instead of "Mongólico"; "tercera edad o mayores" for "old"; and so on. The sentences "dormirse en el Señor" or "exhalar el espíritu" are used



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instead of saying “die”. “Países surgentes” is used to be politically correct, and “Tercer mundo” for “poor countries”.

According to the foregoing, it is inferred that euphemisms are used in the Quito speech for a more comprehensible communication, with a lexicon that demonstrates the idiosyncrasy, identity and culture. On the other hand, the professional life is also compromised with these terms, professions become more prestigious if they adopt certain denominations that demonstrate a language of status, as the use of English words.

Many times the use of euphemisms generates a displacement of meaning and loss of reality perception, this by the eagerness to look good before others, not to injure susceptibility in others, to dignify the person, in short, to fulfill socially. But we also incurred in moving away from the true message that the speaker wants to convey.

5. Euphemisms at work

In the Ecuadorian society, specifically in the labor area, many euphemisms are used to have a polite attitude somewhat diplomatic in the discourse. Phrases like “*El horario no es tan amigable*”, “*reajuste laboral*”, “*reingeniería laboral*”, among others, are the euphemisms that replace the terms: “*no me agrada ese horario*”, “*estás despedido*”. The questions that arise are: are these terms used to replace them because they are derogatory or because they hide the truth? What are the reasons to use euphemisms? What is the intention of the speaker?

Why not calling things by their name? In the Quito idiosyncrasy and in the work environment, the one who dares to say directly: “*llegaste tarde, sin embargo, firmaste como si lo hubieras hecho a la hora de ingreso*”, “*no colaboraste con las actividades de hoy*”; “*el trabajo no está bien hecho*”, is considered a rude person, inconsiderate, with bad feelings and inflexible.

There is not enough maturity and awareness to accept a call of direct attention; they even feel victims of the person who says these statements other ways there be a boss or not, this information goes through the person who pass the information directly or not, using it in demeanor to the person who express the information without using euphemisms.

The language seeks for social coexistence and in this sense each of its functions must be effectively employed, among them, the function of reporting correctly, disinhibiting of prejudices and discarding that submission culture, transforming into a culture of constant work and direct and optimistic attitudes. At work, success will be achieved to the extent that the message gets in a proper way. For this reason the message must be strictly issued without any replacements. In different circumstances the speaker is obliged to use lexical substitutes for various reasons. Interpersonal relationships are affected to the extent that they are used.

At the moment when certain terms of the message are changed by being unpleasant, the true intentionality of that message is being diverted. Hence, the complexity of using euphemistic terms but not literally or from their morphology or syntax, but rather from their semantics.

6. Conclusion

The language is a social act, it is constantly changing and evolves as the society grows and advances, and with it all that refers to the relations and interrelations, time, globalization, the advance of the technology, fashion, the language of power, marketing and technology



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are factors that make new terms and new conceptions of the world to be adopted over the years. In addition, we are part of a process of cultural diversity and social inclusion, where the linguistic variety progresses and treasures our identity.

Social coexistence is essential, where there is a desire not to be rejected, or poorly seen in the group. The individual, above all, is social and needs to be positioned in the group to which he/she belongs, the work environment, family environment, fun areas, among others environments of an individual who interact in society.

The change of meaning in language has social, cultural and psychological causes, among others, and euphemisms originate from the need to be accepted in the group, by the need to be kind, not to hurt, to transmit a timely and conciliatory message, to persuade and to convince. The Ecuadorian society, especially in Quito, has adopted many euphemistic terms to replace the taboo words, the same that are left behind, becoming new euphemisms.

Finally it is necessary to analyze on the imagination of the speaker, which is indefinite and infinite from a socio-cultural vision, therefore, it is not possible to determine that the specific use of taboo words and their corresponding euphemisms belong to a group. The sociological, psychological, and culturally inherited factors provoke a form of reaction and a certain use of the language.

Euphemism is a social linguistic phenomenon that is concretized in a time and in a context of the speaker and the listener, it evolves and changes as society changes and evolves; and it becomes taboo and it is appropriate to find a new euphemism for it. It does not depend on the linguistic sign itself, but on the apprehension sense that each individual adopts.



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Revista Cátedra, 1(1), pp. 129-139, september-december 2018. e-ISSN: 2631-2875

<https://doi.org/10.29166/catedra.v1i1.769>

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Revista Cátedra, 1(1), pp. 129-139, september-december 2018. e-ISSN: 2631-2875

<https://doi.org/10.29166/catedra.v1i1.769>