

Personal Appearance and the Use of Euphemism in the Speech of Algerian Adolescents: the Case of the Constantine Speech Community

المظهر الشخصي واستعمال العبارات الملطفة في كلام المراهقين الجزائريين: المجتمع اللغوي القسنطيني أنموذجاً
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Abstract :

ملخص :

The present paper is a qualitative investigation into the use and awareness of euphemism by Algerian adolescents in the Constantine speech community. The paper covers two hypotheses. First, the speech of the Constantine adolescents is thought to lack the use of proper euphemistic language when describing certain cases of personal appearance that might provoke negative connotations and interpretations. Second, those adolescents are unaware of euphemism as a language skill and its importance in social interactions. To examine the aforementioned hypotheses, a survey was administered to Algerian adolescents living in Constantine, Algeria. Socio-cultural linguistics is the model according to which the notion of euphemism will be investigated. The findings suggest that the use of euphemistic expressions were used more than the use of non-euphemistic ones. The findings have also showed that the informants, based on their answers, are not aware of the concept of euphemism and its indispensability.

Keywords : Euphemism; Dysphemism; Adolescents; Personal Appearance; Constantine Speech Community

يعتبر هذا المقال استقصاء نوعياً عن استعمال ووعي المراهقين الجزائريين بالعبارات الملطفة في المجتمع اللغوي القسنطيني. يشمل المقال أطروحتين. أولاً، يفقر كلام المراهقين القسنطينيين إلى لغة العبارات الملطفة اللازمة عند وصف بعض النماذج من المظاهر الشخصية التي قد تولد معان وتأويلات سلبية. ثانياً، يُعتبَر أولئك المراهقون غير واعين بالعبارات الملطفة كمهارة لغوية وبأهميتها في التفاعلات الاجتماعية. من أجل اختبار الأطروحتين السابقتين تم إجراء دراسة استقصائية على المراهقين الجزائريين القاطنين في مدينة قسنطينة، الجزائر. تم اتخاذ اللسانيات الاجتماعية-الثقافية كنموذج للبحث في مفهوم المتلازمات اللفظية. أشارت نتائج البحث إلى أنه تم استعمال العبارات الملطفة أكثر من العبارات غير الملطفة، كما أظهرت النتائج أن المشاركين—بناءً على إجاباتهم— ليسوا على وعي بمفهوم العبارات الملطفة وأهميته.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العبارات الملطفة، العبارات غير الملطفة، المراهقون، المظهر الشخصي، المجتمع اللغوي القسنطيني.

INTRODUCTION:

Polite language, or, more scientifically, euphemism, is undeniably crucial for any member of society to fit in. This paper undertakes euphemistic language in the speech of adolescents in the Constantine speech community as its subject. The aim, to be more specific, is to reach the conclusion whether those adolescents use euphemism in specific contexts and are aware of it and its importance or not. Hence, in the following pages, we discuss the definition of euphemism in the general and narrower senses, in addition to several real-life situations where euphemism is supposedly applied. The discussion, then, evolves to the mechanisms in euphemism formation to, finally, conclude with the main uses of euphemism when describing personal appearances. The practical side focuses on gauging Algerian adolescents' awareness and use of euphemism in relation to describing some—probably—controversial appearances in society. This is done in the light of the socio-cultural linguistics model of analysis.

1. Literature Review:**1.1. Definition of Euphemism:**

Euphemism is a linguistic and social phenomenon that is inherent in society, though its existence is sometimes subtle that members of society are not consciously aware of it. Linguists investigated this phenomenon from different angles and, hence, defined it differently. The word's etymology indicates that it has a Greek origin, and that it is composed of two parts: "eu", which means "good", and "pheme", which means "speaking" (euphemism, 2012). As for its emergence, Epstein (1985) made an assumption by stating:

In the beginning was the Word. There followed, at an undetermined but one assumes decent interval, private harsh, and dirty words. Invention here being the mother of necessity, the need for euphemism arose. Nowhere could this need have been greater, or more evident, than in the realm of sex (p. 56).

Euphemism can be defined, in a general sense, as the replacement of inappropriate words by other more appropriate ones for reasons, such as religious fear, moral scruples, or politeness (Gómez, 2009). Accordingly, the speaker chooses his/her words appropriately, instead of just uttering whatever crosses his/her mind.

Euphemism was also defined in relation to facework. According to Allan and Burridge (2006), euphemism attempts to prevent loss of face, i.e. embarrassment of the speaker, hearer, or a third party in a conversation. It is a substitute to another less-preferred expression for the sake of preventing loss of face—to the speaker—and offense—to the hearer/listener—(Allan & Burridge, 1996). On a face-saving note, Crespo-Fernández (2014) views euphemism as a polite language aiming to soften the speaker's self-presentational face and the hearer's personal sensitivities. In other words, euphemism can lubricate the conversational wheel to go more smoothly, a thing that ensures more positive feelings during the interaction.

From a taboo perspective, the use of euphemism becomes more indispensable, because taboo language has stronger negative connotations than face-losing ones. Pyles and Algeo (1970) regard any word/expression that functions as an alternative to a taboo word/expression to be a euphemism. In this definition, they include all non-euphemistic expressions (swear words, impolite expressions, discriminatory comments) under the label "taboo." This is obviously an inaccurate assessment, because the degree of offense in calling someone "a nigger" is deeper than calling him/her "fat." On the same note, yet, more accurately, Howard (1985) describes euphemism as the use of mild expressions or periphrasis as a replacement to a taboo

or more vulgar one. In accordance, Rawson (1981) refers to euphemism as soft and indirect language used as a substitution to a harsh, offensive one.

An important term that often emerges in euphemistic studies is “dysphemism.” This latter can be considered as the opposite of euphemism. In this respect, Allan and Burridge (1991) view it as the use of negative and offensive language, instead of a positive one. More specifically, Crespo-Fernández (2014) defines it as a word or expression carrying negative connotations directed at people. Neither of the linguists specifies whether a dysphemism can be a taboo word or not. But, that is not important in this discussion; what counts is to understand what euphemism stands for, in opposition to whatever is a non-euphemism.

1.2. Examples of Euphemism in Several Life Domains:

As long as language and culture are fused into one body, namely society, one will always find euphemistic language practised by members of the speech community. The present section provides examples of euphemistic terms used in daily life by speakers of English.

Table 01:General Daily-Life Euphemistic Terms (from Algeo & Pyles, 2009, p. 220)

Euphemism	Intended Meaning
You are becoming a little thin on top	you are becoming bald
Our teacher is in the family way	She’s pregnant
He is always tired and emotional	He’s drunk
He is a special child	disabled or retarded
You have temporary negative cash flow	you are broke

The following are examples of euphemistic terms from several life domains:

Poverty

Table 02:Euphemistic Terms in the Context of Poverty (from Wang & Wang, 2008, p. 124)

Poor	poverty stricken
	in an awkward financial situation
	badly off
	needy
	deprived
	unprivileged

Death

Table 03:Euphemistic Terms in the Context of Death (Gao, 2013, 2311)

Die	If anything should happen to me
	pass away
	go to his reward
	answer the call of God
	to have a better place
	go west

Mental Disorder

Table 04:Euphemistic Terms in the Context of Mental Disorder (Gao, 2013, 2311)

Mental Disorder	He is not all there
	She is a little eccentric
	She is a little confused

On the other hand, many societal functions have their own dysphemistic terms.

Table 05: Common Dysphemistic Terms (Keyes, 2010, p. 29)

Dysphemism	Intended Meaning
Pig	Policeman
Faggot	Homosexual Man
Egghead	Genius

1.3. Euphemism Formation:

The formation of euphemism is governed by the objectives it intends to meet. Hence, the methods that are followed in the formation vary from a focus on the semantic features to focus on the morphological or phonological structures. The present section portrays two models suggested by Rawson (1981), and Williams and Shipley (1975).

1.3.1. Rawson’s (1981) Model:

This model goes as follows:

1.3.1.1. Positive Euphemism:

The first thing that needs to be known about euphemism is that it does not only serve to mitigate, and this is the case of positive euphemism. According to Rawson (1981), the function of positive euphemisms is to amplify; they make the euphemised object—human, concept, etc.—seem bigger and more significant than it really is, sometimes a hyperbole. This definition includes job titles, e.g. counsel for lawyer. The impression such euphemistic terms leave is that it elevates the job status of the euphemised item.

1.3.1.2. Negative Euphemism:

The case of negative euphemism is the opposite of the former. That is, instead of maximising the effect of the euphemised object, the intent is to make it seem smaller—a reverse mechanism. Examples of negative euphemism are ancient; one example is when the Greeks referred to “the furies” as “the eumenides” (Rawson, 1981, p. 2).

1.3.2. Williams and Shipley’s (1975) Model:

The description that follows details the three types suggested by Williams and Shipley (1975)

1.3.2.1. Shortening:

The shortening process happens when the speaker is unable to utter some words, because they are profanity. The process includes:

1.3.2.1.1. Abbreviations

Per Rawson (1981), words that result in negative feelings when used publicly are shortened to their initial letters. For example, LGBT is used to represent the Lesbian; Gay; Bisexual; Transsexual community.

1.3.2.1.2. Diminutive:

When a new term is formed by shortening a name and adding a suffix to it to denote a small size, the process is called diminution. For example, instead of using “hindend” for “buttocks”, a new term is used, “heinie” (Williams & Shipley, 1975, p. 360).

1.3.2.1.3. Omission:

Omission is the act of not spelling the letters of taboo words (Allan & Burrige, 1991).

1.3.2.1.4. Clipping:

According to Shipley (1977), a part of a longer word is clipped into a shorter version while keeping the same meaning. For example, “bra” is used instead of “brassiere.”

1.3.2.2. Circumlocution:

Circumlocution, according to Allan and Burrige (1991), is the replacement of single words by longer expressions, such as the use of “solid human waste” to replace “faeces.”

1.3.2.3. Remodelling:

According to Allan and Burrige (1991, p. 2), “[T]he sound of words can be altered to conceal something that is offensive.” It can also be called “phonological distortion” where the speaker deliberately alters the pronunciation of certain words, as “heck” for “hell.” Blending and reduplication are other procedures of remodelling.

1.4. The Use of Euphemism:

Euphemistic language can, in fact, be found in all walks of life. It is an inherent part of the linguistic make up of any speech community. In this respect, Burchfield (as cited in Gao, 2013, p. 2313) states that language cannot function fully properly without euphemism; it is an indispensable part of human language. However, there are two foremost areas that stand out: the social area and the political area.

First, on the social front, Cobb suggests that the main aim of using euphemism is to give a certain situation, item, or person a brighter and more comforting image than its actual one (as cited in Enright, 1985, p. 87). This is on a positive note. On a negative note, both social and emotional needs call for the use of euphemistic language, for this permits to reduce the unpleasantness of discussing the specific topics of sex, religion, and personal appearances. The unpleasant feelings and perceptions that arouse from such “delicate” topics are mitigated via the use of euphemisms (Linfoot-Ham, 2005, p. 228). One significant example comes from Australia, where, in all native Australian languages, it is forbidden for one’s community members to mention the name of the deceased person, or to pronounce any word that is similar in pronunciation to the latter’s name. In this case, the deceased person’s name becomes a taboo (Trask, 1996).

In the political arena, the use of euphemism might be more important and diplomatically required. Crespo-Fernández (2014) reckons that politicians refer back to euphemistic language to safely discuss delicate topics and to criticise their adversaries while avoiding any negative perception from their audience. In other words, politicians try to be politically correct by hiding behind euphemistic language. In a similar vein, Crespo-Fernández (2014) reports that a politician navigates through a touchy subject or concept by removing all the words that carry negative connotations or aggressive tendencies in order not to be politically incorrect or violate a social convention. A prime example comes from the United States when President Ronald Regan deflected the journalists’ use of the term “invasion” and insisted, instead on using “a rescue mission” (Deng & Liu, 1989, p. 89). Therefore, as Mayfield (2009) described it, euphemisms “sanitize and camouflage actions, things, or events that could appear unacceptable in light of professed values”, resulting in new perceptions of things and their ensuing outcomes (p. 270).

2. The Study:

The current study is a probe into the use and awareness of euphemism by Algerian adolescents of the Constantine speech community, with regard to certain common appearances seen in public.

The aim behind this research work is to investigate whether Algerian adolescents of the Constantine speech community use and are aware of euphemistic language when faced with specific appearances that provoke negative connotations and interpretations. Accordingly, the following questions are raised:

1. Do Algerian adolescents of the Constantine speech community apply euphemistic language when describing some cases of personal appearance with negative connotations?
2. Are Algerian adolescents of the Constantine speech community aware of the concept of euphemism and its importance?

The hypotheses are as follows:

1. The speech of Algerian adolescents of the Constantine speech community lacks the use of euphemism when describing some appearances that might portray negative connotations and interpretations.
2. Algerian adolescents of the Constantine speech community are not aware of the existence and social value of euphemism.

Socio-cultural linguistics is the umbrella under which the notion of taboo will be investigated. In this vein, socio-cultural linguistics is the convergence of language, culture, and society. "This label also has the virtue of foregrounding the role of culture as well as society in linguistic investigations," claim Bucholtz and Hall (2008, p. 404). Another important aspect is identity. According to van Oers et al. (as cited in Park, 2015), it is the social interactions a person has that shape his/her identity, not some objective feature of his/hers.

The targeted population for this study are Algerian adolescents residing in Constantine, an eastern city. The age span of these adolescents is 18 to 25 years old. The sample, on the other hand, was chosen for the purpose of representing the selected population and reaching answers to the research questions and hypotheses. The informants were chosen from all walks of life (pupils, unemployed, university students, etc.). The selection of the population/sample is not interested in the number, but in meeting the characteristics required for the study.

Concerning the age of adolescence, according to Sawyer et al. (2018), accelerated puberty has been noted in almost all populations, a factor that has increased the age of adolescence well into the twenties. They further add that an age span of 10-24 is more comprehensive than the former 10-19. This allows for a better understanding of that life phase.

The survey contains three sections the informants had to fill in. The first section represents a set of pictures of specific appearances in society that usually elicit attention and, probably, negative impressions in members of society. The reason behind choosing real life pictures was to make the experience vivid and more realistic. In the second section, a set of euphemistic and non-euphemistic words/expressions was provided for each case, and the informants were asked to choose the words they deemed appropriate to use. Finally, section three posed the question whether the words that informants used are acceptable in society. The aim of the last two sections is to gauge adolescents' awareness of euphemistic and non-euphemistic language when describing given personal appearances.

3. Results and Discussion:

The findings are discussed in detail in this section with the purpose of providing a wider and deeper understanding if the phenomenon under investigation.

3.1. Informants’ Reactions to Pictures of Specific Personal Appearances

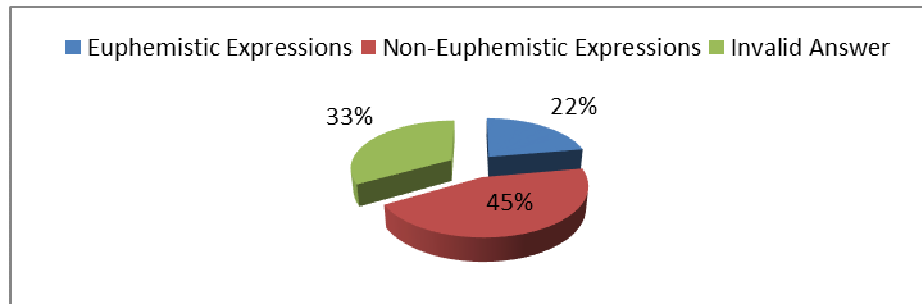
Obese Person

Table 06: Expressions used by Algerian Adolescents Describing an Obese Person

Case	Euphemistic Expressions	Non-euphemistic Expressions
Obese Person	- أصابته السمنة - شخص زائد في الوزن	- سمين/ رجل سمين - مبعز -fat man

The use of standard Arabic is what characterises the euphemistic expressions used to describe obese people. As it is displayed in table six, some of the informants opted for circumlocution when describing the picture they were given. Close consideration also entails that adolescents prefer to be indirect when describing such a case. A proper translation of the sentence “أصابته السمنة”/as0a: bthU sUmna/ is “he suffers from obesity.” In this case, the focus was shifted from the person’s appearance to simply describing the condition.

Graph 01: Frequency of Euphemistic/non-euphemistic Expressions Describing an Obese Person



The statistics of the first case indicate that Algerian adolescents used more non-euphemistic expressions than euphemistic ones. In fact, the non-euphemistic use represented double the euphemistic one. Many questions might be raised when it comes to the underlying reason for such a low frequency in proper euphemistic use; one is that adolescents find obesity a topic that can be brought up for the sake of making fun of the person suffering from it, especially if the conversation occurs between adolescents, and more so if they are athletes.

Homeless Person:

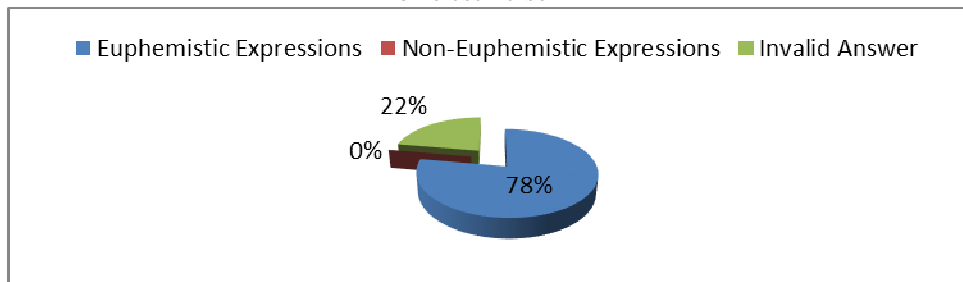
Table 07: Expressions used by Algerian Adolescents Describing a Homeless Person

Case	Euphemistic Expressions	Non-euphemistic Expressions
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Homeless Person	- شخص متشرد / متشرد - فقير / مسكين - مغبون / يغيض
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The present case scored no instances of dysphemism or taboo words when describing the case of the homeless person. Unlike the first case, Algerian adolescents showed sympathy towards the picture under discussion. Such reactions entail using words, such as “مسكين” /mIski:n/ which means “poor.” This latter is not intended to describe the meagre financial status of the person being described, but to express sadness and sympathy. Other euphemistic expressions that were used are “شخص متشرد / شخص فقير” /SaXs0 mUtaSarid/ /faqi:r/ which can be translated to “vagabond/ poor,” respectively. A recurrent pattern in this case is the use of standard Arabic. Is it a coincidence, or will it re-occur?

Graph 02: Frequency of Euphemistic/non-euphemistic Expressions Describing a Homeless Person



A proper interpretation of absence of any dysphemism in the case of the homeless is that such a topic is highly sensitive socially. Any person who regards it with lightheadedness or disdain is extremely and immediately frowned upon. Being sympathetic is often the first response, especially in a Muslim and Arab community that promotes the values of helping those in need.

A Mentally-Ill Person:

Table 08: Expressions used by Algerian Adolescents Describing a Mentally-ill Person

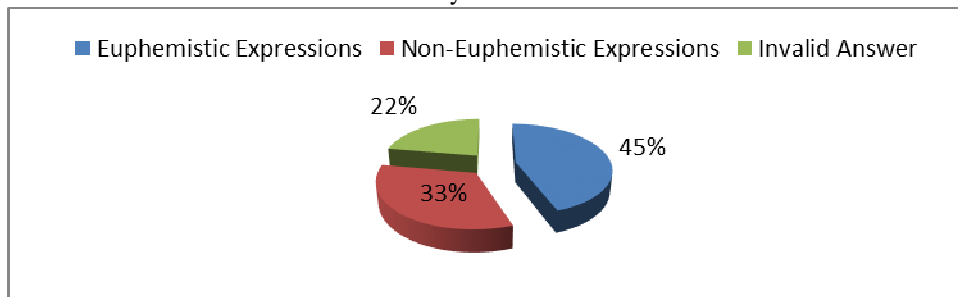
Case	Euphemistic Expressions	Non-euphemistic Expressions
A Mentally Ill Person	- مريض عقلي / مسكين - psychopathe	- شخص مجنون / مجنون - مهبول

The third case showed a linguistic variation in the use of euphemistic and non-euphemistic expressions. Standard Arabic, in addition to Algerian Arabic and French, were used to describe the case. In Algerian Arabic, the term “مهبول” /mahbu:l/ is considered to be offensive when used in a serious conversation, either to describe a sane or mentally-ill person—especially the first case. Sometimes, specifically in an argument, someone might be asked—metaphorically—“نتنا مهبول؟” /nta mahbu:l/ “are you crazy?” to express anger or dissatisfaction with someone’s attitude or actions.

On a different note, what is noticed is that the term “psychopathe”/ psi:kO:pat/ —in French—was used by one person to euphemistically describe the case.

It is no surprise to encounter varying reactions and answers for this case, since some people, especially adolescents, might find it entertaining to use dysphemistic language. This results from a lack of awareness of the impact of their words.

Graph 03: Frequency of Euphemistic/non-euphemistic Expressions Describing a Mentally-ill Person



This case, although recording a fairly noticeable frequency of non-euphemistic terms, noticed a 45 % use of euphemism. This is, in one way, unexpected due to the fact that such a topic is a subject of derision among adolescents.

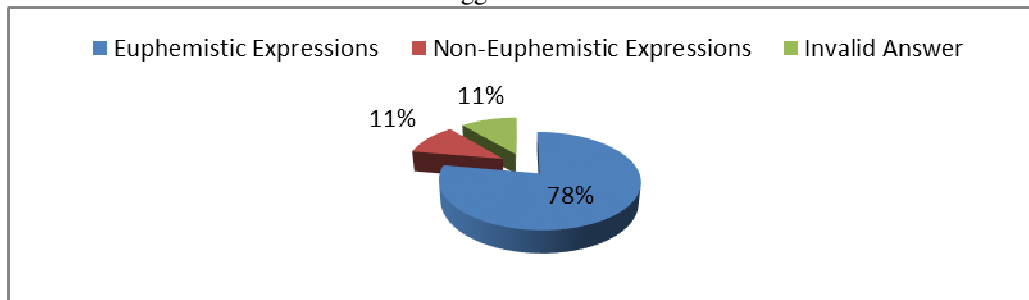
A Beggar

Table 09: Expressions used by Algerian Adolescents Describing a Beggar

Case	Euphemistic Expressions	Non-euphemistic Expressions
A Beggar	- يطلب/ متسول - طلاب مسكين/ انسان يحتاج صدقة	- طلاب

The fourth case witnessed no use of French. However, standard Arabic was again used alongside Algerian Arabic. In the case of the former, the term “متسول” /mutasawil/, meaning “beggar”, was used. In the case of the latter, euphemism-wise, the verb “يطلب” /jotlob/ “to beg” was chosen to describe the action, instead of the status. This confirms what has been stated prior, that, in such sensitive contexts, Algerian adolescents tend to be indirect in their descriptions.

Graph 04:Frequency of Euphemistic/non-euphemistic Expressions Describing a Beggar



The dominance of euphemism is clear in this case. Only one non-euphemistic expression “طالب” /tala:b/ was used.

A Woman not Adhering to the Islamic Standard of Clothing:

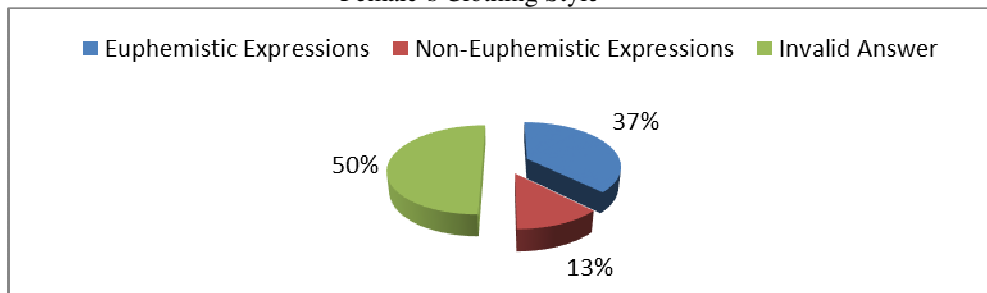
Table 10

Expressions used by Algerian Adolescents Describing a Female’s Clothing Style

Case	Euphemistic Expressions	Non-euphemistic Expressions
A Woman not Adhering to the Islamic Standard of Clothing	حرية - civilisée	- trop maquillée

The ensuing results of the case at hand were unexpected, in a way. Taking into account the fact that the Algerian society is, to a limited extent, religiously conservative, the majority of the answers tilted toward approval of the case. The first interpretation is that there is obviously a generational-cultural shift. In other words, the appearance of a woman not wearing hijab is not condemned anymore among Algerian adolescents. Such judgment can be considered normal given the fact that the non-Islamic way of dressing has become mainstream. In this respect, such terms were used: “حرية” /h0uria/, meaning “freedom”; or “civilisée” /siviliZe/, meaning “civilised.”

Graph 05:Frequency of Euphemistic/non-euphemistic Expressions Describing a Female’s Clothing Style



The reason why half of the answers were invalid is because many informants did not see the entry in the survey, so, they left it empty.

5.3.2. Informants' Awareness of Euphemism:

The following two sections were designed to examine Algerian adolescents' awareness of the concept and importance of euphemism. Accordingly, the informants were provided with a set of terms to describe the previous cases. The results showed that Algerian adolescents are not aware of the importance of the concept of euphemism. One way to argue for this is the fact that they had been provided with euphemistic expressions—unlike the first section, yet, they still opted for non-euphemistic ones. As an example, they had to choose between the terms “زايد في الميزان” /zajed flmi:zen/ /bsah0tu:/ “overweight” and “فيل/عريض/فايض” /fi:l/ /i:ri :d/ /fajed0/ “fat/an elephant”, yet, the majority chose the latter terms, which are offensive in the Constantine speech community.

In a similar vein, in the final section, the informants claimed that the terms they used, specifically non-euphemistic ones, were acceptable within society. This attitude, once again, confirms the hypothesis that Algerian adolescents of the Constantine speech community are not aware of the concept of euphemism and its importance despite the fact that it is prevalent in their description of specific personal appearances that carry negative social connotations (hypothesis one). What this entails is that their use of euphemistic language is mechanic rather than deliberate.

Conclusion:

The aim of this paper was to investigate the use and awareness of euphemism by Algerian adolescents in the Constantine speech community when describing personal appearance. The foremost points surrounding this topic—in addition to other ones—were discussed, such as the definition and euphemism formation. As experimentation, a survey was administered. The model of analysis used was socio-cultural linguistics, an effective tool due to its focus of the cultural and identity aspects mainly targeted in this study. The findings indicated that Algerian adolescents of the Constantine speech community use euphemism more than dysphemism or taboo language when describing certain personal appearances that might carry negative connotations. Nevertheless, the informants did not show any tangible awareness of the difference between euphemistic and non-euphemistic language, which leaves one with the interpretation that they rather use euphemism mechanically and out of habit that is embedded.

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