

“Just use the nice words” – Society’s Idea of Sex as a Taboo Topic and the Resulting Usage of Euphemisms in Different Age Groups

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The usage of euphemisms is based on the idea that there are certain taboo topics which should not be discussed publicly (e.g. bodily functions, sex). In our research, we wanted to determine how different age groups (children, teenagers, adults, elders) use euphemisms when talking about sex. We assume that the different age groups use different types of euphemisms.

In order to identify whether our hypothesis is correct, we compared collected data, consisting of transcripts of edited reaction-videos and interviews on YouTube, and analysed how different age groups (children (5-12), teenagers (13-19), adults (35-55), elders (60+)) talk about taboo topics such as sex. The collected data was then classified in different types of euphemisms as defined by Allan & Burridge (1991). We also added our own categories to the classification (avoidance strategy, gestures). Finally, the findings are presented in table 1, which serves as an overview and tool of comparison between the groups.

Table 1. Overview of what type of euphemisms were used by which age group in percentage

| types of euphemisms | children | | teenagers | | adults | | elders | |
|--------------------------|----------|--------|-----------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| figurative expression | 5 | 22,72% | 6 | 13,95% | 5 | 12,8% | 2 | 4,4% |
| remodelling | 1 | 4,54% | 4 | 9,30% | 1 | 2,6% | 7 | 15,60% |
| flippancy | | | | | 1 | 2,6% | | |
| circumlocution | 3 | 13,63% | | | 2 | 5,1% | 1 | 2,20% |
| omissions | 1 | 4,54% | 4 | 9,30% | 6 | 15,40% | 1 | 2,20% |
| one-for-one substitution | 1 | 4,54% | 10 | 25,58% | 5 | 12,80% | 6 | 13,30% |
| general-for-specific | 2 | 9,09% | 11 | 23,26% | 7 | 17,09% | 16 | 35,60% |
| part-for-whole | | | 2 | 4,65% | 1 | 2,6% | 3 | 6,70% |
| hyperboles | | | | | 2 | 5,1% | | |
| understatements | 3 | 13,63% | 5 | 11,63% | 5 | 12,80% | 13 | 13,30% |
| avoidance strategy | 5 | 22,72% | 1 | 2,33% | | | | |
| gestures | 1 | 4,54% | | | | | | |
| technical jargon | | | | | 4 | 10,30% | 3 | 6,70% |
| amount of usage (100%) | 22 | | 43 | | 39 | | 45 | |

It becomes evident that all age groups use euphemisms, which means that everyone is aware of the taboo topic. The general-for-specific type of euphemisms seems to be the most prominent type in most age groups, especially elders use it frequently. However, the findings confirm our hypothesis that the usage of euphemisms differs depending on the age. Elders prefer to use remodellings, while adults tend to omissions. Another difference is that young people (teenagers and children) make use of an avoidance strategy which is not used by elders nor adults. This strategy consists of answers that have nothing to do with the actual questions. The following example is taken from a one-to-one conversation between Maddox and his father (Cut 2015):

(1) [dad]: But we're gonna tell you about how babies are made, would you like to know how babies are made?

[Maddox, 6]: MADE OF WATER. (...)

This strategy is the most prominent amongst the euphemisms used by children. Also, children use gestures such as pointing to the body part instead of naming it. This can be due to the fact that their vocabulary range is not high enough to find a fitting substitute. In contrast to that, adults tend to use technical language more than young people in order to avoid the taboo words.

Another difference is that the adults and elders use circumlocutions, while children and teenagers do not. The circumlocution which were found in the children-data were all suggestions made by adults that the child repeated (e.g. Flex 2016):

(2) [girl,7]: I know what they do with that. They put it ... Umm. Women put them they put them right under their ... thingy.

(girl looks at someone behind the camera)

[girl,7]: Private parts? They put it under their private parts.

In summary, we found evidence that each age group is aware of the taboo topic of sex. However, the collected and examined data shows that different age groups use different types of euphemisms to avoid taboo words.

References • Allan, Keith & Kate Burridge. 1991. *Euphemism and Dysphemism: Language used as a shield and weapon*. New York: Oxford University Press.
• Cut. 2015. The Birds and the Bees [Maddox] – Parents Explain https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nj7Tgjejrs&t=1s&ab_channel=Cut [23.01.2021] • Flex. 2016. Kids Explain Periods https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JxdGj3GEqds&ab_channel=Flex [23.01.2021]