RESEARCH ARTICLE

EUPHEMISM IN ORAL COMMUNICATION: CONVERSATIONAL CURSING, FAMILIARITY, VIEWS AND ATTITUDES

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to investigate the students' euphemism in oral communication with regard to their conversational cursing, familiarity, views and attitudes. This study used the naturalistic approach using a research instrument first used by Jay (1992) and Vernon (2016). For this present study, the first set of respondents composed of 60 AB-English Language (AB-EL) students also answered another set of survey to elicit reasons why they curse and the dominant functions of cursing in their oral communication. Descriptive statistics was used to determine relationships among the variables and chi-square tests were run to investigate whether distributions of categorical variables differ from one another. Results showed that students curse moderately per day garnering a frequency of 41.67%. Most students use more *Major* curse words than their *Weaker* variants. To determine the reasons why students use curse words, this study used the NPS Theory of Cursing by Timothy Jay (2009). It consists of three interconnecting and interdependent areas: Neurological Control, Psychological Restraints, and Socio-cultural Restrictions. In the first area which is the neurological control, most students never considered *Tourette syndrome* and *Novelty* as reasons why they curse. *Automacity* (30%) gained an interesting positive response followed by *Emotional Arousal* (33.33%). Under Psychological Restraints, the students responded that *Impulsivity* (36.67%) is always the reason why they curse followed by *Coping Skills* (31.67%), then *Moral Reasoning* (15%) and *Deviance* (15%). Finally in the Socio-cultural Restrictions, findings revealed that students always curse because of *Intimacy* (40%) and *Disgust* (40%) followed by *Privacy, Gender Role,* and lastly, *Formality*. Results further showed that there is no significant relationship between students' perception on the functions of cursing and their age, and that the students believe that firstly, cursing relieves pain and stress and secondly, cursing boosts confidence and makes communication comfortable. Ultimately, results showed that cursing is not a very serious matter to the students. Students just curse for some reasons other than making it a serious business for a more profound oral communication. The second set of respondents composed of 47 AB-English Language (AB-EL) students answered a self-report questionnaire on euphemism familiarity and views and attitudes toward euphemism. Results showed that students have distinct characteristics regarding the application of euphemistic terms, and that they have positive neutral views and attitudes toward euphemism regardless of their diverse familiarity of euphemistic terms. However, there is no statistically significant relationship between the students' euphemism familiarity and their views and attitudes toward euphemism. Findings then revealed that euphemism could neutralize or lessen the harshness of curse words or offensive terms, thus lifting the strength of the offensive words to a lighter degree acceptable to any types of audiences and situations. To sum up, the outcomes of this research on euphemism and cursing offer a valuable means of establishing an understanding which explains the exploitation of euphemisms in the oral communication context.

INTRODUCTION

Cursing is a linguistic activity involving the use of taboo words (Stapleton, 2010). However, it is not always about evoking negative emotions; cursing itself can be a cultural phenomenon.

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The willingness to break a cultural taboo in front of others creates an atmosphere of informality especially in oral communication and a sense of community. Speech perception is nearly automatic in mature individuals (Pinker, 2007). With curse words, speakers immediately gather every negative meanings and connotations. The use of euphemism can lessen the harshness of the offending word and as time goes by, it becomes a part of one's vocabulary.

There are many offensive and unmentionable concepts, which euphemisms refer including death, war, intercourse, bodily functions and disability (Brind and Wilkinson, 2008). According to Jackall (2009) and Soles (2009), the use of euphemisms for making unmentionable concepts mentionable and less offensive is generally a good and acceptable thing, but there are serious objections to the use of such terms because these terms may deceive people. Some researchers focus on ethical considerations and call the euphemism "the morality of rhetoric". Fernandez (2005) emphasizes the importance of euphemisms in the everyday speech and treats them as a form of "verbal behavior". Pan (2013) argues that man has created euphemism to avoid the embarrassment or ease the sting of harsh words. English euphemism is not only a social phenomenon, but also a lingual phenomenon. In social interaction, people have to use different words to convey, their thoughts and ideas in an acceptable manner (Linfoot-Ham, 2005). In this sense, the need for euphemisms both social and emotional, as it allows discussion of 'touchy' or taboo subjects (such as sex, personal appearances, or religion) without enraging, outraging, or upsetting other people. Moreover, euphemisms are commonly used in people's daily speech especially in informal oral communication, and fulfill two functions in it, namely,(1) toning down the nature of potentially offensive things which people need to mention and speak about; and (2) neutralizing negative connotations associated with offensive entities (Lim, 2012). Euphemisms do not always appear in lexical form and that intonation or tone of voice could be euphemistic, that is, apologizing with your tone for what you are saying (Gomez, 2009). To put it simply, the use of euphemisms does not necessarily mean praises or words replacing unpleasant or offensive words. There are so many factors to consider and they can be subtle and hard to pinpoint. However, this research only focuses on euphemisms in oral communication limiting only to conversational cursing, familiarity, views and attitudes.

Objectives of the Study: In this study, cursing in oral communication was determined along with its dominant reasons based from the NPS Theory of Cursing employed by Jay (2009). Students' euphemism familiarity, and their views and attitudes toward euphemism were also determined along with its dominant reasons. Specifically this study aimed to:

- Collect and classify students' curse words and determine their reasons of using them;
- Determine the relationship between students' perception on the functions of cursing in oral communication and their age;
- Determine the students' euphemism familiarity and their dominant views and attitudes toward euphemism.
- Evaluate the students' views and attitudes toward euphemism whether positive, negative, or neutral; and
- Determine the relationship between the students' euphemism familiarity and their views and attitudes toward euphemism.

Theoretical background of the Study: As outlined in the Neuro-Psycho-Social (NPS) Theory of Cursing, cursing covers a multitude of categories including but not limited to swearing, obscenity, profanity, verbal aggression, slang and scatology. All of these terms refer to the types of offensive speech understood to communicate insults, compliments, expression of strong emotion, as to evoke emotional responses (positive or negative), from those that are targets of such speech.

Ignoring cursing elicits that language produces little anxiety or fear. It produces language "devoid of its taboos" (Jay, 2010). It is almost impossible to define human emotion language without referencing the role that human emotion plays in one's expression and motivations. NPS Theory of Cursing redefines language to include cursing because a language has to represent the speaker's knowledge of pragmatics, politeness, figurative language, vulgarity, insults, sex talk, humor, verbal abuse, and anger (Jay, 2011). The study of offensive language in linguistic helps fulfill the communication gaps that non-curse words cannot achieve. In a radical departure from theories based on digital modal accounts of cognition and language, Lack off and Johnson (1980) proposed an account of metaphor as fundamentally conceptual, arguing that familiar linguistic metaphors are but surface manifestations of underlying conceptual relationship. This is called the "Theory of Conceptual Metaphors" which traced the underlying metaphor to a literal concept based on embodied physical experience. McGlone *et al.* (2006) presented an alternative theory for the use of euphemisms in language. They suggested that the speaker may use euphemism to convey a positive self-representation of respect and credibility. They argued that euphemisms can eventually become a synonym for the term it replaces contaminated with the negative connotation originally avoided. This suggested that the replacement of euphemisms is not due to contamination as they thought, but may instead reflect the evolution of the conceptual metaphor in question and change as their views and knowledge of the topic change, such as sexual assaults or post-traumatic stress disorder.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Descriptive research method was used in this study using a self-report and a survey questionnaire with a test on euphemism familiarity. The self-report questionnaire elicited responses regarding reasons for cursing according to NPS Theory of Cursing by Jay (2009) for the first set of respondents composed of 60 AB-English Language (AB-EL) students. The second set of respondents composed of 47 AB-English Language (AB-EL) students answered a test on euphemism familiarity and a survey questionnaire adopted from Hasegawa (2005). Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, and averages were used to analyze the data. Chi-square (x^2) statistics was employed to compare categorical responses of dominance among the variables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first objective of this study which have 60 students as respondents was to collect and classify curse words and determine their reasons of using them. Words were collected when respondents circled the curse words and the frequency distribution was recorded as percentage. Curse words were then classified into two groups: *Majorcursewords* and *Weakervariants*. The curse words that have been indicated in the self-report questionnaire were based from the top Cebuano curse words widely used in Cebuano-speaking areas (Antonio, 2015). The first word *Yawa*is an example of a major curse word along with *Peste, Yati, Animal, Giatay, Kayat, Leche,* and the like. Frequency was obtained from how many responses each item received. The *Weakervariants* were defined from the counterparts of the *Majorcursewords* and are considered euphemisms, thus the words *Jawa/Panuway, Piskot/Peshket, Jati/Jatis, Nimal/Lamina, Atay/Liver, Kayas/Kayang, Echel/Lechugas,* and so on.

Results showed that majority of the students use more curse words under the *Major* variant than its *Weaker* variant. This implies that major curse words are the most basic whenever cursing is triggered. Weaker variants of curse words are variation which are usually created by peers or close associates and society. The context of most *Major* curse words usage signifies cathartic reactions, joy, frustration, anger, shock, and disappointment. To determine the students' reasons of using curse words, this study used the NPS Theory of Cursing by Jay (2009) as its bases. In the Neurological control, results showed that most students never considered *Tourette syndrome* and *Novelty* as reasons why students curse. It appears that most of the respondents are not suffering from *Tourette syndrome* or the Neurological disorder characterized by tics and vocalizations often the compulsive utterance of obscenities. The students also do not consider *Novelty* or the feeling that they should curse to be trendy and make them socially accepted by their peers as their reason for cursing. *Automaticity* gained an interesting percentage (30%) from among the respondents which is then considered as more of a prepared mental response to a situation. The respondents also considered cursing for *Emotional Arousal* which signifies too much joy or excitement. Under Psychological Restraints, the students responded that *Impulsivity* (36.6%) is always the reason why they curse. This is followed by *Coping Skills* (31.67%), *Moral Reasoning* (15%), and *Deviance* (15%).

This implies that students curse mainly because of sudden impulses or shock *(Impulsivity)* followed by mechanisms against stress and fatigue *(Coping Skills)*. The Socio-cultural restrictions area revealed that students always curse because of *Intimacy* (40%) and *Disgust* (40%) followed by *Privacy* (36.67%), *Gender Role* (33.33%) and lastly, *Formality* (25%). This implies that students curse usually when they are around people who also curse and with their peers and close associates. To sum up, the reasons why students curse showed that there are more curse item indicators selected as *Always* under Socio-cultural Restrictions. Socio-cultural knowledge regarding cursing, rudeness, or impoliteness is acquired as the product of living in a culture and contacting different communities of practice which reward, punish, or are indifferent to offensive speech. Reactions to cursing are pointedly marked by power and status relationship. Another powerful influence on the likelihood of cursing is the social and physical location of the conversation. The students curse because they believe they are in an appropriate place with a receptive audience. Findings also revealed that there is no significant relationship between students' perception on the functions of cursing and their age. This means that all of the 60 respondents belonging to the age bracket of 16-17, 18-19, 20-21, 22 and up have parallel views on the functions of cursing. The respondents from any age bracket can agree or disagree to the functions of cursing in oral communication in which the dominant ones as perceived by the respondents are (1) Cursing relieves pain and stress; and (2) Cursing boosts confidence and makes communication comfortable. This implies that students tend to use curse words as a reaction to or as an outlet of pain and stress caused by their daily activities, and to improve their confidence as they converse with their peers or close associates. To determine the students' euphemism familiarity, a test on euphemism with its respective common-word equivalence was given to the second set of respondents composed of 47 AB-English Language (AB-EL) students. Results showed that 2 (4%) of the respondents have *very low* euphemism familiarity, 6(13%) *low*, 20 (43%) *average*, 18

(38%) *high*, and 1 (2%) *very high*. This implies that students differed in their euphemism familiarity depending upon their exposure of euphemism item found in the test. With regard to the students' views and attitude toward euphemism, results showed that a large portion (62%) of the respondents viewed euphemism indicators positively. The remaining 38% chose the neutral stance. This implies that respondents fully know the significance of applying euphemism despite of their level of euphemism familiarity. Thus, the alternative theory of McGlone *et al.* (2006) on the use of euphemisms in language supports the result of this study in which respondents convey a positive self-representation of respect and credibility, and that euphemism becomes a synonym for the term it replaces neutralizing the negative connotation of a particular word. This is the reason why majority of the respondents have positive views and attitudes toward euphemism. However, their said views and attitudes and their euphemism familiarity are not statistically related. In support to this result, McGlone *et al.* (2006) contends that euphemism familiarity can actually improve, rather than degenerate, a euphemism's face-saving capacity by enhancing its camouflage-like properties. As a word or phrase becomes conventional, the effort required to comprehend it and the attentional focus it elicits decrease substantially (Bowdle and Gentner, 2005).

Conclusions and recommendation

From the first set of respondents composed of 60 students, the results of this study concluded that the respondents' perception on the functions of cursing in oral communication is not exclusive to any age bracket. It is also concluded that majority of the respondents use major curse words which are considered stronger variants. Major curse words are prime curse words and not influenced made by peers and society. The respondents curse mainly according to their socio-cultural restrictions which comprise *Intimacy, Disgust, Privacy, Gender Role, and Formality*. Basically, they regard cursing in relation to the place where they curse and to the audience as well. This study also discovered that the usage of curse words has something to do with proper decorum and has certain limitations. Furthermore, it suggests that the use of curse words is changing the way the students speak and this can be dealt with new techniques for better oral learning. This shows that cursing is not a very serious matter to the students. They just curse for some reasons other than making it a serious business for a more profound communication that they tend to shift to euphemism depending upon the situation of the conversation. From the second set of respondents composed of 47 students, the study has come to a conclusion that the respondents had different exposure and applications on euphemism. Those who have high or average euphemism familiarity are active users of euphemism, and that respondents still have positive views and attitudes on euphemism despite of their diverse euphemism familiarity. They are still aware of necessity to use euphemism depending upon the context. Respondents eventually considered euphemism as a synonym or a term it replaces. This is possible since respondents who have low familiarity on euphemism still viewed it either positively or neutrally, but not negatively. Thus, the alternative theory of McGlone *et al.* (2006) supports this study. Since result showed that there is no statistically significant relationship between students' euphemism familiarity and their views and attitudes toward euphemism, their views and attitudes toward euphemism do not necessarily relate to their levels of euphemism familiarity.

For the students, this study will let them notice the subtle issue and possible negative outcome of cursing in public and in informal communication. Since most of the students use major curse words, this research will recommend the use of euphemisms in their expressions. For the teachers, this research accommodates the idea that cursing boosts confidence and the teachers can use alternative strategies to convert cursing as a useful tool in oral communication. For the society, this study suggests that the use of curse words carries some risks about oral defamation and verbal abuse. People, if cursing is not avoided, are to use curse words in the appropriate place and to the specific audience and circumstance. However, since most of the students have positive and neutral feedback about euphemism, this research recommends the use of euphemisms in their expressions instead of the use of major curse words. It is also advised that students be more aware of the application of euphemism not just on lexical form but also the euphemism within the tone and intonation. For the teachers, this research recommends to make the students even more familiar about euphemistic terms. It would be a challenge for them to accommodate students with proper knowledge and awareness toward the use of euphemism for an effective communication. They are to apply euphemism as a polite way of expressing themselves rather than deceiving others through sarcasms. Students must know how to use euphemisms as a tool rather than as a barrier in communication. Generally this study further recommends more familiarity on euphemism regardless of their views so students may become familiar with the curse words considered to belong in the *Weaker* variants. This is to raise awareness and knowledge to apply euphemism in context.

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