

# **"DON'T LOOK AT HIM DOWN THERE": EUPHEMISM AS POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN SELECT NIGERIAN NOVELS**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the use of euphemism as one of the conversational strategies deployed by Nigerian novelists to drive home the thematic concerns of their literary engagements. The analysis is anchored on Brown and Levinson (1978) face management theory, which explains how discourse interactants are mindful of how they use language in interactive situations. With the aim of reducing the potential harm of some forbidden expressions, which due to societal norms, are considered as either blunt or offensive to the hearer/reader. Four texts: Sefi Attah's *A Bit of Difference*, Abubakar Adams Ibrahim's *Season of Crimson Blossoms*, Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen* and Lihwu Betiang's *The Rape of Hope* were purposively selected because they have examples of how euphemism is deployed as a conversational strategy. The qualitative analysis involves random sampling of excerpts that contain euphemism across the four novels. Two major categories of euphemism are identified, namely, sex and death. Also, eight lexical euphemisms and twenty-six sentential euphemisms are found in the texts under study. The analysis shows that euphemism is a strong discourse strategy that is not only strategic to toning down the effect of an expression on hearer, but a linguistic modality which discourse participants activate basically for politeness reasons. Also, the analysis indicates that the Nigerian sociocultural context exerts monumental pressure on conversationalists' use of language, making the discourse participant to resort to the use of euphemism.

**Keywords:** Euphemism, Brown and Levinson, strategies, Nigerian novels, death; sex

## **Introduction**

The Nigerian novel can be distinguished from other world novels using two interrelated criteria. First is the use of language. Every national literature has its peculiar language in that there is often a conjunction between the literary language and the non-literary language of the environment in which the literature is produced. In the Nigerian novel, for example, there is a symbolic parallel between the use of language in the Nigerian novel and the Nigerian sociolinguistic milieu. This means that, not undermining the concept of "literary language", the way literary characters use language is reflective of the way non-



literary characters use language in real life situation. It is along this thought that Adesanoye (2014, p. 46) argues that there is a variety of English known as "Literary Nigerian English" that is basically used by Nigerian writers. According to him, Literary Nigerian English defines the peculiar ways Nigerian writers use language in their literary works that makes their writings ontologically Nigerian. "What this signals", argues Aboh, "is that the Nigerian literary environment exemplifies how English is adapting to sociocultural situations, depicting its various pragmatic uses and how the different contexts provide a framework for the propagation of a variety of English that many Nigerians can identify with, communicate through and express themselves in" (2018, p. 81). Over the years, as the English language moves from region to region and from country to country, it adapts to the new environment in which it finds itself. Thus, "Nigerian novelists' use of language indicates that literature provides a fertile ground for the modifications of English" (Aboh and Uduk, 2016, p.6). These modifications are often reflective of the Nigerian multicultural and multiethnic configurations. Delineating the intricate juncture between language and literary production, Wa Ngugi (2018, p. 21) does not think that it is possible to divorce language from a literary tradition, for the language is the literature and the literature is the language. While this postulate can be interpreted from the politics of nationalism, it well underscores how a literature can be understood by its language. Beyond that, embedded in this kind of argument is the ideation that any theory that can be used to analyze real life speech can also be used to analyze literary language.

Second, critics of Nigerian literature have argued that "Nigerian novelists see themselves as storytellers" who "tell stories of a particular kind and with a particular intent, however, for these writers understand themselves to be bearing witness to Nigeria's social experience" (Griswold, 2000, p.3). In other words, "Nigerians tell their own tales" (Griswold, 2000, p.13). This view is upheld by Akung (2021, pp 29-30), who argues that the Nigerian novel contains experiences drawn from the Nigerian region, and drawing its themes from the culture and tradition of the Nigerian people. Thus, the Nigerian novel is a committed effort targeted at transliterating the Nigerian traditional life into an artistic form. Consequently, a reading of the Nigerian novel can be taken as a reading of the sociology of Nigeria, for it "explores experiences relating to Nigeria within a Nigerian setting" (Akung, 2021, p. 31). Hall (1990, p. 222) puts it more trenchantly. He argues that "we all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific". This reechoes the fact that what a writer does with the systems or resources of language is inseparable from the social events and conditions which shape its production. This means that placing the language of a text within its socio-historical background has a way of enriching our understanding of the text's thematics. People's use of and interpretation of language is often linked with their context, the context of writing



and existence. It follows that an analysis of the sociocultural embodiment of euphemism as used in the selected texts is equally an analysis of real speech in the Nigerian sociolinguistic context.

In the light of the foregoing, this paper examines how euphemism serves to function as conversational strategies in the works of the novelists under the purview of this study. Euphemistic expressions feature conspicuously in the transactional as well as interactional use of language in Nigeria's literary works. Euphemism as used in interactive situations can be said to perform two important functions. First, it serves as a linguistic tool by which discourse participants avoid taboo language. Second, it is a set of discourse strategies which participants employ to save a co-interactant's face wants. In the Nigerian sociolinguistic context, certain expressions are regarded as taboo, and therefore, discourse participants draw on euphemisms in interactive situations to avoid damaging the face want of a listener. This is the concern of this study.

### **Previous Studies**

There have been a number of studies which have examined the use of language in Nigerian novels, and some of them have focused on the juncture between linguistic choices and sociocultural constraints, providing insight into how euphemism is strategic to the conversational choices people make in socio-discursive encounters. For example, Allan and Burridge (1991) viewed euphemism and dysphemism as two sides of the same coin. They explored a linguistic modality of euphemism covering naming, connotation, conversational maxims, metaphors and speech acts, explaining the indefinite range of euphemisms and dysphemisms that interactants use while considering context, motivation and intention as key to why and how people use euphemisms. An interesting revelation of their study is the position that people use euphemisms not merely as a response to taboo; rather, they deliberately use or avoid using them. The point is that whether the use of euphemism is deliberate or not, the choice to or not to use it is a conversational strategy. This is what this paper sets out to do: that is, to explain the use of euphemism in conversational encounters, especially in literary situations.

Aboh's (2015) study of four Nigerian novels focuses on euphemism as conversational strategies which discourse participants deploy while addressing sex and sex-related topics. He argues that the deployment of euphemism, both at the lexical and sentential levels, in discussing sex-related topics in conversational encounters is strongly informed by the cultural norm of the Nigerian people where sexual issues are not to be discussed openly. Hence, Aboh's study establishes the link between euphemistic expressions and people's cultural necessities. Aboh explains further that the main aim of using euphemism in conversational situations is to save the face wants of a hearer.



Bennet (2015), also, investigates the metaphoric use of euphemistic and dysphemistic expressions in the construction of gender ideology in select Nigerian novels. The study examines Nigerian novelists' deployment of cultural euphemisms and dysphemisms in portraying patriarchal and feminist ideologies. He concludes that men and women could be upholders of their tradition through their use of euphemistic and dysphemistic expressions in portraying the gender ideology in cultural practices. This, Bennet opines, checkmates the sweeping wave of globalization which is eroding Nigeria/Africa's cultural practices in the area of gender ideology and relations.

More pointedly, Ezeife (2017), applying Warren's (1992) model of euphemism, explores the connection between the choice of euphemism and the construction of gender ideologies in Sefi Attah's *Swallow*. Ezeife argues that the use of euphemism in *Swallow* illustrates how language intercepts with society's expectations as well as cultural conditions in determining gender intersections in the Nigerian context. She also makes the case that euphemism is central to how language in a gendered Nigerian novel reflects existing gender subjects such as family and marriage related issues. Ezeife concludes her study by noting that euphemism is an indispensable tenet of African communication. This position is relevant to the present study because it aligns with the objective of this study, which is to explore euphemism as a conversational strategy in select Nigerian novels.

From the foregoing, it can be seen that although critics have done some work on the use of euphemism as a conversational technique in general, and particularly in Nigerian novels, this study contributes to extant study in the field of language and politeness from the prism of euphemism. This paper critically analyzes euphemism commonly associated with sexual discourse and death as depicted in the purposively selected Nigerian novels. The purpose of engaging in this scholarly exercise, therefore, is to illustrate how language users deploy euphemism as a discursive strategy with the aim of reducing the potential harm of some forbidden expressions which, due to societal norms, are considered as either harsh or offensive to the listener/reader.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The analysis of sex and death related euphemism undertaken in this study is driven by Brown and Levinson's face management theory (1978). This theory is adopted in order to provide accurate account of the use of euphemisms as used in this study. It is expedient to state that what a euphemism is or means is culture-bound. According to Brown and Levinson (1978), politeness explains the concern shown towards an individual's face want. Face is defined as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (1978, p. 66). Face is divided into positive face and negative face. Positive face is an individual's desire



to have their self-image approved of by others and negative face describes a person's desire not to be impeded or imposed upon. People in interactive situations want their face wants to be acknowledged and respected. Mensah, Nzunake and Adejumo (2022, p. 6) explain that the two types of face, according to Brown and Levinson (1978) framework, directly correlate with positive and negative politeness respectively. They argue that the notion of politeness is a social convention, and every interactant in a communication situation combines different politeness strategies.

Kipkirui (2021) argues that the Brown-Levinsonian politeness theory advances the idea that a discourse participant in a conversation is expected to maintain a self-image in the public hence gives the strategies for a speaker that mitigates the force of potential threat. In using this theory therefore, the effective euphemisms in sex and death related situations, discourse participants are able to avoid conflict that would have been occasioned by linguistic rudeness and aggression. Also, Opinde and Kandagor (2016, p. 43759) write that Brown and Levinson (1978) theory "presupposes that rational members of society should strive to keep their faces intact and need to reinforce in their view of themselves as polite, considerate, respectful members of society". This means that being polite is a conscious illocutionary act, and it is irrational to talk about sex and death in an unmitigated manner. In this regard, politeness is about respect for self and for other. What this suggests is that the use of euphemism in interactive encounters is occasioned by respect for self and other members of society in line with sociocultural expectations of the people's community of practice. Bearing this view in mind, Aboh (2015) avers that "language users resort to euphemism with the purpose of mitigating the potential danger of certain taboo words or expressions taken to be too blunt or offensive for a social situation". It has to be stated that it is the context of language use, the participants and the topic of discourse that determine what passes as euphemism.

Crespo (2005, p.75) opines that euphemism is "a more general phenomenon that participants in communicative exchanges employ with the purpose of softening the effects of what they really wish to communicate, avoiding as much as possible, offence and conflict". Aboh also notes that, "a euphemism is an expression that presents or attempts to present an uncomfortable or undesirable situation in an agreeable or elevated manner" (2015, p.114). What can be deduced from the foregoing views is that any linguistic expression which attempts to avoid conflict in interpersonal communication is said to be euphemistic. Timothy (1999) maintains that in all cultures of the world, people have created euphemisms to describe genitals, sexual acts, sexual body parts, and body products. It is therefore not surprising that today, there are many euphemistic expressions referring to sex, sexual acts and body parts. Apart from euphemistic expressions on sex and parts of the body, some other unpleasant



situations like death are also expressed euphemistically. This suggests that euphemisms occur in different forms of human communication. Bearing in mind that the Nigerian culture is characterized by high degree of indirectness, this paper scrutinizes the various communicative uses to which euphemism is put in the selected Nigerian novels.

### **Methodology**

Data for this study were purposively drawn from four Nigeria novels: Sefi Attah's *A Bit of Difference* (2013 hereafter *Difference*), Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen* (2015), Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *Season of Crimson Blossom* (2015 hereafter *Crimson Blossom*) and Lihwu Betiang's *The Rape of Hope* (2016 henceforth *The Rape*). The choice of these authors and their texts is, first, informed by the fact that the texts, given their relative newness, are yet to receive robust scholarly attention. Second, these novels, published between 2013 and 2016, have either been shortlisted for both local and international literary prizes or have won literary prizes. It is expedient, therefore, to interrogate the authors' linguistic choices in order to account for how their use of language helped in making them receive both local and international attention. Of importance, the paper examines the strategic use of euphemism as a politeness strategy in literary discourse. The analysis involves random sampling of excerpts from the text. This means that the study focused on euphemism and the meaning embedded in its use. The qualitative analysis accounts for the linguistic choices people make in interactive contexts and their intended meaning. Therefore, the analysis undertaken in this paper is constrained by the theoretical framework adopted by the study.

### **Data Analysis**

Euphemistic expressions identified in this study are split into two domains: lexical and sentential. Lexical euphemism refers to a word or a phrase used in the coating or cloaking of an otherwise culturally repulsive or harsh expression. In this case, the given word captures the full meaning of the repulsive or harsh words. In sentential euphemism, a sentence is used to express a culturally offensive or blunt experience. More explanations on euphemism and its conversational impulses are discussed from two broad directions: sex and death related euphemisms.

### **Sex Euphemism**

In Africa, as in other parts of the world, due to cultural orientation, sex and sexual acts are not discussed openly. This is because "sex provokes embarrassment when mentioned plainly in public. It is a topic that is considered private and inappropriate to be discussed in public (Kipkirui, 2021, p. 5). Many



people in the African society shy away from discussing sex and therefore prefer to use euphemisms in conversational situations to express their views and positions about sex and sexual acts. In *Crimson Blossom*, for example, Dije Tsamiya, the marriage counselor of Kibiya, tells Binta on her wedding day:

When he's done, always put your legs up so  
his seed will run into your wombs (*Crimson Blossom*, p.52).

In the sentential euphemism, Dije educates Binta on what is expected of her after sex with her husband. The clause "when he's done" is used to represent the act of love-making with her husband. Also, "his seeds" euphemistically stands for the husband's sperm. She is expected to raise her legs so as to fertilize her womb after sexual intimacy with her husband. The expression achieves its objectives because both women understand the meaning that is concealed in the euphemism. Since both of them operate within a cultural practice that forbids openness in discourse of sexual matters, they know what is meant by "when he is done" and "his seeds". Of importance, "done" lexically indexes after sex, and "he", which referentially refers to her husband, has a mental representation as it finds relevance in the overall discourse of marriage, that, sexual intimacy is a constituent of marriage, and the essence of sex is for procreation – the reason she has to lift her legs.

Not only is sex a tabooed subject in Nigeria as well as other cultures, the relationship between the discourse participants also necessitates politeness in lexical choices. Binta is a young girl that is going into a marriage whereas Dije is an older person. This calls for caution in terms of lexical choices. In furthering their discussion, Dije tells Binta what is traditionally expected of her during sexual relationship with her husband:

Dije had slapped her playfully, her frail hand like a cow whisk on Binta's shoulders. "See how you look into my eyeballs. Don't look your husband in the eyes like that especially when you are *doing it*. Don't look at *him down there*. And don't let him look at you *there*, either, if you don't want to have impious offspring" (*Crimson Blossom*, p. 51-52 italics is mine).

Due to the fact that sex and sexual organs are not openly or directly mentioned, Dije uses "down there", a deictic expression that connotes distance to refer to both the male and female genitals. The implication is that sex is conceived as a sacred activity that is that does not have social signification. It is traditionally to make children. Also, the sexual activity is referred to as "doing it". So, the young bride is told not to look at her husband in the eyes during sex and also never to



look at her husband's genitals and vice versa in order not to have irreverent children. One can see the influence of culture in the way people are expected to be polite in their choice of words in interactive situations. In the environment in which *Crimson Blossom* was published, there are lots of restrictions placed on individuals in terms of sex and sexually related topics. This position echoes my earlier view that literature can hardly be disentangled from the events of the society that produced it. Human behaviour is affected in so many ways by social experiences and circumstances within the context of their inherited cultural milieu. It is, therefore, not surprising, that Dije relies on euphemisms to inform Binta of what lies ahead in a marital relationship with a man she barely knows. It should, perhaps, not be taken for granted certain shared sociocultural information that backgrounds the interaction. Dije, on her part, understands Binta knows what she implies by "when he is done". Also, Binta believes, given the fact that Dije is an older woman with sexual experiences, she knows that Binta and "he"- Binta's husband -will have sex, because the cultural context allows for conjugal bliss between married couples. Both discussants are working from the knowledge that the essence of marital sex is to produce children. This is the reason his "seed" has to "run into" Binta's womb. The use of "he" in this context is also euphemistic in that the culture teaches women to respect their husbands. One of such expectations is that the woman does not call her husband by his name. The use of "he", therefore, functions as a honourific.

In the next example taken from *Hope*, sex is referred to as "it":

And as they did they cast aspersions on her in the manner one would spit out sputum: useless girl, abuser of motherhood, what did you think of *when you were doing it*? You will never see a child again. And on and on and on (*Hope* p.234, italics is mine).

The excerpt describes the condemnations cast at a young lady who had a child out of wedlock and threw the child into a pit lavatory. Spiting lady, one of the onlookers asked her what she was thinking when she was doing "it". "It" euphemistically refers to the sexual act. The writer employs the lexical item "it" which is euphemistically loaded and details with the image of the sexual act. The Nigerian culture frowns at sex outside marriage and it is widely believed that the essence of sex in a marriage is for procreation. Thus, it is a social aberration that one should have sex outside marriage, and it is an unforgivable offence to throw the resultant child into the lavatory. The onlookers hence rain curses on the girl, calling her "useless girl", "an abuser of motherhood" who will never see a child again.

Many people in Nigeria shy away from discussing sex, especially outside marriage which is the institution that regulates sex, reproduction and family life.



This is why the young woman who had sex outside marriage came under verbal attacks. The offending lady is further accused of knowing the ecstasy of engage in sexual intimacy.

What did you not know? You know how to sleep with man and enjoy it all; not so? (*Hope*, p.234)

In the above excerpt, the word "sleep" is not used in the ordinary sense of sleeping but used euphemistically to mean to have sexual intercourse with a man. The young lady in question is accused of having sex with a man, enjoying the act but does not know how to take care of the baby that results from the "enjoyment", that is sexual bliss.

In the example presented below, Deola articulates the premium the Nigeria society places on chastity—a prerequisite of some sort for a lady to find a man who is interested in her:

Well- brought – up Nigerian girls were essentially housewives—in-training. They dressed and behave more mature than they were, cooked for their boy didn't party much. *Useless girls slept around*. A guy had to rape a girl before he was considered that useless and even then someone would still go out with him and attribute his reputation to rumor (*Difference*, p.27, italics mine).

In the fragment above, the importance of marriage even in faraway London is underscored. Nigerian girls in London behave well and perform wifely duties for their boyfriends in order to be considered marriageable. It is only "useless girls" who have indiscriminate sex which is euphemistically described as "sleeping around". The traditional African family is patriarchal, and many cultural practices continue to reflect male dominance. A girl is expected in the African context to behave in a way that shows that she is in conformity with the accepted norms of the society as pertaining to marriage. However, a boy is not under such restrictions. As we see in the example, a man has to commit such a heinous crime as rape before his reputation is called to question. In the African culture, domestic service and child care roles are assigned to women. While a man is free to have as many sexual partners as he desires, a woman is seen as "useless" if she dares to have more than one male sexual partner. The euphemism "slept around" is a positive politeness strategy which the novelist uses to underscore the importance of piety in the Nigerian context.

The use of euphemism to describe girls or ladies who use their sexuality to get material gains from older men is contained in the example below:



Even if her parents approve of her moving out and renting a flat, she couldn't afford to rent in any decent part of Lagos. On her salary, her options were to find a *sugar daddy* or hustle for a government contract, which would probably not be awarded without a sexual favour (*Difference* p.88, italics mine).

The expression "sugar daddy" is deployed strategically as a negative politeness marker to derisively describe an older man, probably rich, who spends money on young women, money, in exchange for sexual pleasure. The expression is euphemistic because a man or "daddy" is expected to think and act responsibly but a situation where he acts irresponsibly, he is despised by society hence the appellation "sugar daddy". The young girl in such a relationship is usually young enough to be within the age bracket of the man's children hence the term "daddy". Due to the fact that elders are to be respected, the term is used derogatorily to describe such an irresponsible man. In the above example, Deola decides to move back to London where she studied having worked for a short time in her father's bank. She believes that in London she could live independently without bothering her parents for support. But that is not the case in Nigeria. In Nigeria, the amount of money she earns in the bank is not enough for her to live on her own unless she gets the support of a rich older man who will provide her with the comforts of life in exchange for sexual gratification. But she prefers to travel back to London because having a "sugar daddy" conflicts with the social convention of her Nigerian society.

As mentioned earlier, euphemism is usually employed in conversational situations to avoid taboo language which is likely to offend the hearer; Ibrahim in *Crimson Blossoms* uses a euphemistic expression to talk about Rita's promiscuity:

'Come, let's talk about money'! Reza pretended not to notice the obstruction. When he pushed past Gattuso, he saw Rita, whom almost *all the boys had had*, sprawled on the rumpled sheets of the mattress (*Crimson Blossoms* p.197, emphasis mine).

The expression "all the boys had had" is a euphemism for sexual intercourse. The young lady in question has been sexually involved with almost all the "boys" in San Siro. Due to the fact that promiscuity is frowned at by the society, the euphemistic expression is used to protect the sensibility of the reader. This is done in polite observance of social capital of communication.

As have the sexual intercourse itself, some parts of the body relating to sex are conveyed using euphemism as it is inappropriate to mention them directly in public conversations. This is evidenced in the excerpt below:



Binta heard him thundering about how big his daughter had grown under his roof and how men now watched her jiggling her melons in public places, and how it was time for her to start a family of her own (*Crimson Blossoms* p. 23).

The cultural expectation is that one has to be polite, especially in sex-related topics. Also, for the sake of reducing friction in interpersonal interaction (Lakoff, 1975, p. 64), Binta's father uses "melons" to refer to Binta's breasts. It should be noted that the context in which the expression is used, despite being a euphemism, is an example of negative politeness. The lexical euphemism "melons" refers to "breasts". Binta's father, Mallam Sari Mai Garma, accused Binta of shaking her breast in public places, thereby attracting the attention of men. "Melons" are edible fruits and they are used here to connote sex because the men who are presumably attracted to the melons will want to suck them. This is a source of worry for Binta's father as it is an aberration in his culture for his daughter to have sex outside marriage. This fear is informed by the fact Binta and her friends were seen playing on their way from school by Mallam Dauda, Binta's prospective father-in-law. In order to save her daughter's reputation, Mallam Sari Garma quickly married Binta off.

Similarly, in *Fishermen*, a euphemistic expression is used to describe a body part that relates to sex.

Ikenna if you don't open that door now, I will show you that I am your mother, and that you came out from between my legs (*Fishermen*, p. 60).

"Between my legs" as used in this passage directs attention to the location of the vagina (female sex organ). Due to the cultural practices and in observance social convention of her society, sexual activities and organs are discussed in secret or with indirect expressions. In the above example, Adaku, who is agitated because of Ikenna's aggressive behaviour towards his younger brother, Boja, uses the euphemistic expression to stamp her authority in her household. In the Igbo context in which the *Fishermen* draws its narrative, it is believed that a child can never rise above its parents. A child is supposed to be humble and obedient to its parents. In order to let Ikenna know the extent of her agitation, Adaku reminds him that she is his mother and that he "came from between her legs", a reference to her vagina. The euphemism expresses the Igbo communal belief that a child is never greater than its parents.

Also in *Crimson Blossom*, sexual pleasure is described as sweetness, something one desires to taste as Mallam Haruna informs Binta:



'Haba Binta, why not give me a chance! I am a match for any young man, more than a match even. I am virile and experienced'.

'...Hajiya Binta, by the God who made me, I am desperate to...well,' (*Crimson Blossom*, p. 280).

Again, in *Crimson Blossom*, the lexical item "thing" is euphemistically used to describe sexual relationship. The example below testifies to this:

'Kai! Reza, you did not do well killing a good man like that.'

'It was not intentional. I never meant for it to happen-'

'I hear you were having a thing with his old mother, Ko? Kai! Reza, you are a proper *daniska* like this... (*Crimson Blossom*, p. 337).

Binta's sexual relationship with Reza ends tragically with the death of her son, Munkaila. The senator meets with Reza after the altercation between Reza and Munkaila led to the death of the later. And the senator tells Reza that he heard that Reza has a "thing" with Munkaila's mother. "Thing" here stands for sexual relationship. It is a relationship between an unlikely pair. So, the senator euphemistically refers to it as "a thing". In this case, this functions as an example of negative politeness because the Senator refers to the sexual relationship between Reza and Binta diminutively. The Muslim, north of Nigeria where the novel is set, is home to a culture of sexual repression such that sex and sexually-related topics are covered in secrecy. So, the senator indirectly refers to the uncanny relationship between Binta and Reza as "a thing" in observation of the cultural and religious constraints on sexual topics.

### Death Euphemism

Typically, a euphemism is used to avoid offending or upsetting someone, or to avoid talking directly about an uncomfortable topic. Death being an unpleasant situation is usually not talked about directly and whenever it occurs, people use different euphemistic expressions to discuss it in order to lessen the effect on the relations of the bereaved and other individuals. In line with positive politeness, people have different ways and methods of talking about death because the idea of death makes one uncomfortable, so no one likes to talk about death directly. Below are some examples of euphemisms relating to death as seen in the texts under study.

In the example taken from *Difference*, Seyi's father announces the unfortunate death of his son to Deola's family thus:



"Unfortunately, we have lost Seyi" Lost him where? She thought. (*Difference* p. 32).

In the context of the novel, Lanre and Seyi, who were great friends, had an accident on Kingsway Road, Lagos, while going home from a party. Lanre is unconscious while Seyi died instantly. Seyi's father in observance of the positive face want of his family and in order not be offensive, says we "lost him". The lexical item "lost" in this instance is a euphemism for "death". The use of "lost" has a subtext in that in the Yoruba cultural context, it is an abomination for a child to die before his father. So, Seyi's death is a lost more so as he has no-one to continue his lineage. This is an irredeemable loss. However, the effective use of the expression has been able to soften the weight of the loss.

In *Crimson Blossoms*, a euphemism is used to capture Dije Tsamiya's childlessness:

No one, it seemed remembered what Dije Tsamiya's married life had been like. Her husband had died many years ago and the last of her three children had passed on a decade before (*Crimson Blossoms* p.51).

The expression "passed on" is a euphemism for "died". Being that Dije's husband had died many years ago, the writer prefers a euphemistic expression to talk about the death of her three children. The sole aim for the preference for euphemism is to lessen the pain of a woman who has virtually lost all she has. Dije has seen many troubles in her life. Such a situation depicts someone in deep pains. But people have a way of managing communication in ways that the listeners are not overburdened by sorrow. Euphemism performs this strategic function. The narrator's preference for euphemism is not only a conversational strategy, but also contextually determined. The context that is, Dije's childlessness, calls for caution in the use of language in describing her pathetic situation. This example is closely related to the excerpt taken from *Fishermen*:

The food I'd just scooped into my mouth was instantly forgotten at this news of Oga Biji's death, for I knew the wasted man (*Fishermen* p.113).

In the above excerpt, Iya Iyabo informs Adaku of the untimely death of Oga Biji who was inadvertently killed by his wife. Benjamin is shocked by the news of the man's death. The writer instead of repeating the word "death" or "dead" uses the euphemism "wasted" which is an indirect way of saying that the man is dead. The euphemism as used here is a conversational strategy that helps the writer to avoid boredom and therefore makes the novel more interesting. The lexical item "wasted" also adds more meaning to Biji's death as even in his life time; he lived a wasted life of drunkenness.



We also find another example of euphemism referring to death in *Fishermen*. After the death of Ikenna and Boja, Adaku, their mother, is overwhelmed by grief and bemoans her fate at every available occasion. On one of such occasions, she laments:

“Looked at the breast they sucked; they are still full. But they are no more” (*Fishermen* p.183).

A full breast signifies youthfulness which shows that Adaku, the bereaved mother, is still in her youthful age, and so, it is painful to lose two of her children. She shows off her youthfulness, that is, her full breast and euphemistically informs the sympathizers that the children who sucked the breast are “no more”. The words “no more” are an indirect way of saying that the children are dead. Death is a very painful experience and in most African cultures it is never mentioned directly. This could also be the reason why after Ikenna’s death, Adaku on the phone tells her husband in Igbo:

“Eme, Ikennaanaaaaa”! (*Fishermen*, p.151)

In her grief, Adaku could not utter the heavy word “dead” so she uses “anaaaa”, an Igbo word which translates to “gone” and which means death. In the Igbo worldview, death is seen as a rite of passage to the metaphysical world. It is regarded as a ritual journey that connects the families of the living with the dead. So, for Adaku, Ikenna has gone to meet his ancestors but because death terminates familial bond among the living, it makes bereaved relatives especially sad. The author’s use of this euphemistic expression gives the reader a view of the cultural realities of the environment of the novel’s setting.

## Conclusion

By working within the theoretical framework, this study shows are owing to the need to be polite, discourse participants employ euphemisms. In doing so, they archive effective communication. The use of euphemism in the texts shows how language is used in the different interactive and cultural contexts in line with the social convention of a people. We see how discourse participants employ euphemism to express pessimism and reluctance. Language is also deployed in these novels to portray the social, religious and cultural life of the people among other things. The use of euphemism in these novels demonstrates the robust semantic potential of Nigerian cultures.



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