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Semantic Study of Death Euphemisms in Bura Language

Abstract

This study investigates semantic study of death euphemisms in Bura language, with the objectives of identifying, classifying and analysing death euphemistic words in Bura language. It analyses euphemisms semantically. Data was collected from eight Bura native speakers, four males and four females aged 40 and above in Hawul and Biu Local Government Area Councils of Borno State. The model adopted was Burridge (2012:66) on the classifications and functions of Euphemisms. The scope of the study is death euphemism in Bura language by justifying its data using the provocative and ludic euphemism among other classifications of Burridge (2012). However, this model has the case of overlapping in provocative and ludic. The provocative euphemism inspired and revealed (death euphemism); ludic euphemism to amuse, have fun, and entertain (death). The result of the study shows death as “God called”, “returned home”, the time has clocked”, dust his/her feet”, and “heaven has fallen” (for a death of a leader). It shows death euphemisms as comforting and inspiring. These inspiring words gives comfort, courage, and motivation to the deceased family by letting go of the past and moving forward on the future. However, the findings of the study showed linguistic evidence of “lexical, compound and sentential euphemisms in Bura death euphemisms. The study indicates Bura people resort to euphemisms in referring to death because death is the inevitable end of human life and a journey to the other side of the world.

Keywords: Semantics, Euphemism and death

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1.1 Introduction

The word Bura refers to both the language and the people. The Bura people live in Borno,

Adamawa, and some parts of Yobe State. Bura language is linguistically classified as an AfroAsiatc family which is further divided into five branches namely: Chadic, Berber, Cushitic, Semitic, and Ancient-Egypt families. Bura language belongs to the Central-Chadic of Biu- Madara group (Greenberg, 1963). According to the Bura oral tradition, the Bura people claim to have migrated from Yemen in the Middle East to their present location of Biu Plateau. The Bura dialect is spoken in the eastern part of Bura land covering areas such as

Kwajjafa, Kwaya Bura, and Sakwa Districts. The Bura people are organized into clans headed by a leader who is the most senior among them. "Clans" means "Yankur" with a name identity (thimfwal, or thim geli) this is a large group after the "Nyabwa". Apart from the name identity, the "yankur" is a borne-by group of people who have common ancestral fathers and beliefs such names of the male folks include Balami, Mshelia, Bwala, Wakawa, Msheliza, Wakirwa, Dahwa, Wudiri, Mbaya, Shalangwa, Tarfa, Wagami, Bassi, Malgwi, Dibal and Ndahi and the feminine clan names include Jauni, Zhawa, Kwatamdia, Kwarmiksa and Zoaka. Presently, the Bura people are under an Emirate headed by an Emir (Kuthli) who oversees the affairs of the emirate. Biu was initially called "Viu" by the Bura speakers while the Pabər pronounced it "Biu" because the Pabər people are from the Kanuri language (Davies, J.G 1954). This is why Bura and Pabər are the same language. Badejo et al. (1987). Mu'azu and Balami (2010:8-11) also identify two distinct dialects among the people of Bura which are the Bura and Pabər. The two dialects are classified as the western dialect (spoken south-southwest of Biu and the Eastern dialect spoken in the central and Eastern parts of Bura land).

However, in studying euphemism, one needs to understand the culture of the language with which the euphemistic words are expressed. There are words, phrases, or sentences that seem to be inappropriate, offensive, or unpleasant to the ears which can be substituted with pleasant words called the Euphemism. Euphemism is primarily regarded as a substitution of pleasant words for a more offensive term. It is more related to the culture tradition and customs of the people Euphemism is a stylistic means of communication of figurative speech or context. African languages used it to avoid hate speech and promote language sustainability among its people. The use of euphemisms is common among the traditional African communities, this is because taboo words are forbidden and substitution of words or phrases is encouraged among native speakers to express ideas or pass a sensitive information without raising sensitive emotions or feelings. A single taboo word in a language can be substituted with several euphemistic words in substituting the explicit truth by using kind words. Euphemism in the Bura language serves as a practice of norms and tradition in the use of proverbs. It serves as a style of communication to stimulate peace, and harmony and avoid hate speech. Hate speech instigates war, violence, and intolerance which have a devastating effect on a language. Burchfield (1985:29) claims that "any language without euphemism would be a defective instrument of communication". This is because euphemism is a strategy or style of communication and communication is paramount in every language. Therefore, Euphemizing serves a good purpose whether as a positive or negative aspect of human life. Leech (1981:53) defines euphemism as the "practice of referring to something offensive or delicate in terms that make it sound more pleasant or becoming than it is". However, those words that are avoided are central to our life but cannot be uttered openly because they are part of the human daily life Al-Husseini (2007:329).

Bura language have shown strategies of communication, the study scope to strategies of death euphemistic expression. Therefore, the present study is set to unravel the strategies of communication using death euphemistic expressions in Bura Language.

2.1 Literature Review

Neaman and Silver (1983) traced the root of the word euphemism to "a Greek word "eu" means "good" or "pheme" means "speech" or "saying" which means to "speak with good or in a pleasant manner". They further define the word Euphemism as "substitution of the inoffensive or pleasant term for a more explicit offensive one".

Williams (1957) examines the formation of euphemism and exemplifies different linguistic devices such as borrowing words, Widening, Semantic shifts; metonymies Metaphorical transfer, and the last is phonetic distortion which includes Clipping /Apocopation form of abbreviation, back forming, reduplication, and the last is Phonetic distortion.

William's classification of euphemism shows semantic features of borrowing, widening, shift, metaphor, and phonetic distortion but his classification is based on novel contextual meaning whereas the present study analyzes daily language use of death euphemisms in Bura language.

Rawson (1981:1-9) asserts euphemism in the lexicographic approach, he claims that euphemisms are formed consciously or unconsciously which he categorizes into positive or negative. The positive euphemism inflates and magnifies, making the euphemized words more important than they are. It includes fancy occupational titles that save the workers by elevating their job status.

Warren (1992) presents an interpretation of words using euphemism in the novel contextual meaning. She classifies euphemism under two major heading formal innovation and semantic innovation. The formal innovation is word formation (compounding, derivation, blends, acronyms, and onomatopoeia), phonemic modification (back slang, rhyming slang, phoneme replacement, and derivation), and loan words. Semantic innovation is the particularization, implication, metaphor, metonyms, reversals, understatements, and overstatements. Warren has significantly studied euphemism formation showing different linguistics formations but the study is a contextual novel meaning while the present research analyzed words, phrases, and sentence euphemisms used in Bura language.

Burridge (2012) propounds a model of communicative functions and classification of euphemisms and further categorizes euphemisms into six types and functions which are:

1. **The Protective Euphemism** "to shield and to avoid offense"

The function of the protective euphemism is to use "shield and to avoid offense". This type of euphemism is a verbal escape in response to taboos. Such euphemisms include private part and body function sex.

2. **The Underhand Euphemism** "to mystify and misrepresent"

This type of euphemism is used "to mystify and misrepresent". This deliberately disguises a topic or misrepresents a topic. These include doublespeak, for example, from the Glossary White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, Candy stick euphemism for Marijuana, cigarettes laced with powdered cocaine, and poor quality drugs for Lipton tea.

3. **Uplifting Euphemism** "to talk up and to inflate".

The uplifting euphemism is used "to talk up and to inflate". This type of euphemism refers to the alternation of words and expressions which are jargon and slang used in organizational industries. Examples Accommodation of stationary vehicles, the author believed the phrase has more connotation than parking places or car spaces.

4. **The provocative Euphemism** "to reveal and to inspire".

The functions of the provocative euphemism are "to reveal and to inspire". This euphemism aims to help remove the stigma of negative unpleasant words, by convicting the audience to the simple meaning in reality example death as a journey (pass away). Consolation of death as the beginning of life.

5. **Cohesive Euphemism** "to show solidarity and help define gang"

The functions of cohesive euphemism are "to show solidarity and help define gang". This type of euphemism is mostly used among peer groups that belong to one social community and organization. For example, hospital staff who have to manage disease dying and death

daily will euphemize disease to give hope for the dying patient example E C U as an Emergency Care Unit. Military terms five and six mean good friends are inseparable.

6. **Ludic Euphemism** “to amuse, have fun and entertain”.

The function of the ludic euphemism is used “to amuse, have fun, and entertain”. For example in the 18th century, the miraculous pitcher held water with the mouth downwards for “vagina”.

Burridge has classified, highlighted, and exemplified six types of euphemisms, however, her classification overlaps. The present study only adopted the provocative and ludic euphemism because it accounted for death euphemism.

2.2 Death Euphemisms

Gustafsson (2007), investigated death euphemisms used by American and British English, however, the study was a corpus-based study showing frequency in the use of six euphemisms concerning death and dying expressions which are: deceased, pass away, perish, demise, the departed and fade away. The result of his findings shows euphemisms for death are not very common, which implies that people in the 21st century are not afraid of death as what is claimed to have been the case during the earlier years.

Fernández, C, E., (2016), investigates the language of death in Victorian obituaries using the conceptual metaphor in the mid-nineteenth century. The results obtained supported “the idea that there was a tendency to present sentimental obituaries in which the taboo of death as a desirable event under the influence of Christian beliefs”. The metaphoric euphemistic substitutes in the cognitive domain are: death is a loss, death is a joyful life, death is a rest, death is a reward, and death is the end.

Usman (2020) significantly studied Hausa taboos, he classified seven Hausa taboos which are Anatomy, bodily acts, and actions, deference (kinship relation, political sphere terms), animal, plants and tree, insult, description and direction, the last is death. Examples of death euphemisms in Hausa are, “faku, kaura (die), koma makoma (gone to one’s abode), rasu (die), cika/cikawa (fulfilled), ce ga garinku (said I has departed your town)”.

Owiredu, C, (2020) conducted a comparative study on the Akan and Hebrew euphemistic expressions for death using the conceptual metaphor theory by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). Five categories of death metaphors have been applied which aimed at the similarities and differences of death in the two languages. The study reveals how Akan and Hebrew culture shares the same attitude to death using death as a loss, journey, departure, end, sleep/rest, and death as a person.

3.1 Research Methodology

To generate data for this research, the interview was conducted among native speakers of Bura language four males and four females from the age of 30 and above in Hawul and Biu Local government area of Borno state. The researcher used their native speaker’s intuition to validate the data collected in the field through structured interview.

3.2 Model of Approach

The study adopted Burridge (2012) because the model accounted for death euphemism among others such as Williams (1957), Rawson (1981:1-9), and Warren (1992).

4.1 Discussion

4.2 Provocative Euphemism

This type of euphemism helps to remove stigma or anger of situation or circumstances that surround one by revealing and inspiring.

4.1.1 Death Euphemism

Death is an inevitable end of human life. Death creates a vacuum of pain and sorrow for the family and loved ones. In dealing with the subject of “death”, Bura language users try to soften the effect of what they wish to communicate by substituting the word death with less shocking and inspiring messages. The table below shows the euphemistic words and phrases for expressing death among Bura native speakers and its community.

Bura Taboo /Gloss	Bura Euphemism/Gloss	Euphemistic Meaning
mta Died	1.Shamtadzi Loss	One has died
mta Died	2.Hyel yu/ni God asked him	God called him home
mta Died	3.tsa nka aka Hyel He returned to God.	He has returned home to God.
mta Died	4.saka/ni ka hara Time him has clocked	His time has clocked
mta Died	5.fumta səl Dust legs	Dust his feet
mta Died	6.Hyel ndla God thundering	Heaven has fallen.
mta Died	7.tsa kwa mbwa di He in room ground	He is in the grave.
mta Died	8.ta teri ata kulahu She left on the chair.	She died on child delivery.

Analysis

The function of the provocative euphemism is “to reveal and inspire”. Death euphemism reveal the absence of one on the surface of the earth. These euphemisms are:

shamtadzi

Lexical Euphemism

Loss

shamtadzi “loss” revealing the absence of one on the surface of the earth a

Literal meaning

saka ni ka hara.

Sentential Euphemism

Time his/her has clocked

V + Pro + Pp + V

“His time has clocked” means his time on the surface of the earth has clocked revealing the absence of one on the surface of the earth.

Literal meaning

tsa kwa mbwa di.

Sentential Euphemism

He in room ground

Pro + Pp + N + N

“He is in the grave” revealing the absence of one on the earth.

Literal meaning

ta teri ata kulahu. **Sentential Euphemism**

she gone on chair.

Pro + V + Pp + N

“she died in child delivery” reveals the absence of one on earth through child delivery.

Figurative meaning: metaphor “gone on chair for died in child delivery”.

Whereas the inspiring words are:

Hyel yu ni Sentential Euphemism

God called him

N + V

“God called him home” means the person is no more on earth. **Literal meaning**

ta nka ka Hyel. Sentential Euphemism she returns to God.

Pro + V + Pp + N

“he/she has returned home to God” means the person is no more on earth but with God in heaven. **Literal meaning**

Hyel ndla Compound Euphemism

God fallen

N + V

Hyel ndla “God fallen” meaning “heaven has fallen” **Figurative meaning:** hyperbole “heaven has fallen for death of emir or leader”. This euphemism is a hyperbole symbolizing a leader as heaven a mighty one. The inspiring words brings comfort to someone faced with an exceptionally hard time reassuring him that the deceased is in paradise with God. These inspiring words gives courage, and motivation to the deceased family by letting go of the past and moving forward the future.

Sentence form using the above Euphemisms.

1. a. mwala/ni **shamtadzi.** Wife his died.

Meaning: His wife died.

1b. bzir na **shamtadzi** aha Maiduguri.

Son my died in Maiduguri.

Meaning: My son died in Maiduguri.

2a Hyel **kuyu ni**

God called him

God has called him

Meaning: God has called him home.

2b Hyel **kuyu** salir/na.

God called husband my.

Meaning: God has called my husband home.

3a. tsa **nka ka Hyel.**

He returned to God.

Meaning: He has returned to God.

3b. Kwarma/na **nka ka Hyel.**

Sister my return to God.

My sister has returned to God.

Meaning: My sister has returned to God.

4a Saka/ni **ku hara.**

Time his clocked.

His time has clocked.

Meaning: He has died.

4b. **Saka** mwala/na **ku hara.**

time wife my has clocked.

My wife's time has clocked. Meaning: My wife has died.

5a Sal halhalni ku **bumta səl**.

Man old has dusted legs.

The old man has dusted his legs.

Meaning: The old man has died.

5b. kəka/na ku **bumta səla ri** ashina.

Granny my has dusted legs her today.

My granny has dusted her legs.

Meaning: The old woman has died.

6a. Hyel **ndla** ashina.

God thundering today.

Heaven has fallen.

Meaning: The emir died in the community.

6b. bulama mburu **shamta dzi**.

Bulama ours died.

Our village head has died.

Meaning: our village head has died.

7a. mwala na akwa **mbwa di**.

Wife my in house underground.

My wife is in the underground house.

Meaning: My wife is in the grave.

7b. Kəka na akwa **mbwa di**.

Granny my in house underground.

My granny is in the underground house.

Meaning: My granny is in the grave.

8a mwala na teri ata **kulahu**. wife my fell off chair.

My wife left on the chair.

Meaning: My wife died on child delivery.

8b nkwarma na təri ata **kulahu**.

Sister my left on chair

My sister fell off the chair.

Meaning: My sister died in child delivery.

This type of euphemism is created purposely to have fun and to entertain and it is mostly used among peer groups of the same age bracket as found by the study.

Euphemism/Gloss	Euphemistic Meaning
təsa bumta səl Dust legs. Dust his feet.	He dies

Analysis

bumta səl

Compound Euphemism

Dust leg

V + N

The above euphemism is said to amuse, have fun, and entertain. Grandchildren only used the word “bumta səl”, for the death of grandparents because of the upcoming celebration.

Figurative meaning metaphor “dust leg for death”.

5.1 Conclusion

In conclusion, the study examines death euphemisms in Bura language. It identified, classified, and analyzed death euphemisms semantically. It classified the death euphemism into Provocative and Ludic euphemisms based on the model. The Provocative euphemism as “shamtadzi” loss someone, “Hyel kuyu ni” as God called him home, it consoles love ones assuring them of a better place, while the ludic euphemism is toamuse, have fun, and entertain. Grandchildren refer to the death of a grandparent as ludic because of the upcoming celebration and cracked jokes asking fellow when his /her grandparents will die. The study shows linguistic evidence of “lexical, compound and sentential euphemisms in Bura death euphemisms, figurative and literal meaning. This clearly shows Bura people resorting to euphemisms in referring to death. The functions of Bura death euphemisms are to shield in a less offensive tone, expressions that are unpleasant or scathing to the ears, to avoid offense, hate speech, and promote language sustainability culture and tradition, stimulate peace, harmony, and unity in Bura community.

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