

# Euphemism in Saudi Slang: An Attitudinal Survey Study

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**Abstract**—This study explores some euphemistic expressions in common usage in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). It evaluates the degree to which Saudis are familiar with these expressions and how frequently they use them. The KSA covers a large area with a variety of dialects; thus, any socio-linguistic research which deals with slang should be meticulous. One enabling factor for this study is that Saudis are comparatively religious and avoidant of linguistic taboos, and consequently employ euphemisms often. Several research papers have tackled taboos in the KSA, but most of these have been contrastive to or comparative with British English or American English, while others have explored standard euphemistic expressions in classical Arabic. This study is unique in dealing with selective euphemisms used in Saudi slang through a survey devised to measure peoples' degree of knowledge as well as their usage of such expressions. After analyzing the results of the questionnaires, it is possible to derive several attitudinal results, the most important of which include the findings that present-day Saudis are generally well-acquainted with euphemism in their language and that they are inclined to employ it in everyday situations wherever appropriate. The population selected for this study is resident within the Al Riyadh region, or what can be called "Najid". As the heart of the KSA, this region has Saudis from various regions and with a range of linguistic differences. However, it is recommended that similar studies be taken up in different parts of the KSA so as to pinpoint regional variations.

**Index Terms**—euphemism in KSA, Saudi slang, socio-cultural taboos

## I. INTRODUCTION

Al-Azzeh (2010) underlines the concept that language acts as the embodiment and index of culture. Euphemism is therefore but one linguistic feature among many that reflect cultural characteristics and points of view. Wafi (1983) asserts that languages are considered to be the carriers of cultures and at the same time that they function as an accurate record of a people's history.

Hudson (2000, p. 261) writes that euphemism is defined as "the extension of ordinary words and phrases to express unpleasant and embarrassing ideas", while Willis and Klammer (1981, p. 193) define euphemism as "a mild or roundabout word or expression used instead of a more direct word or expression to make one's language delicate and inoffensive even to a squeamish person." Rawson (1981, p. 1) states that euphemisms should be seen as "powerful linguistic tools that are embedded so deeply in our language that few of us, even those who pride themselves on being plainspoken, ever get through a day without using them". Moreover, Crystal (2003, p. 173) states that there are some words which many people avoid using because they may offend, harm or embarrass other members of the society where politeness is concerned. In addition, Allan and Burridge (1991, p. 14) take the view that euphemistic expressions may frequently be used "in order to avoid possible loss of face." In a later publication, Allan and Burridge (2006, p. 29) also indicate that the term "euphemism" is originally Greek and that it is the opposite of "dysphemism", which means 'bad' or 'unfavorable'. Burridge, however, outlines in "Blooming English" (2004, p. 187) the view that euphemisms are dishonest and that in their character, they recall the double speak that George Orwell exposes in his famous novel, *1984*. Moreover, Greenbough (1900, p. 300) sets out the view that euphemism, the *faux-pas*, politically correct words (PCWs) and "don'ts" flourish with civilization and that those who may be regarded as less civilized people "call a spade a spade". In other words, the more civilized the society, the more euphemisms it uses.

In the context of the Arabic language, Sadiqi (2003, p. 78) claims that the general meaning of "taboo" in Western culture correlates with the Arabic term "*Haram*". Moreover, Al-Azzam et al. (2017, p. 66) make the link between euphemism and religion, quoting the affirmative imperative (وليتلطف)<sup>1</sup> from the Holy Quran, which means "Euphemize", despite the fact that the translation is generally rendered as "And let him be careful"<sup>2</sup>. Holder (2002, p. 449) puts forward an index containing 70 euphemistic thematic categories: the author stresses however that it is not possible to avoid an overlap between these categories. For example, the category death can clearly be seen to overlap with the category of funerals, and so on.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The sensitive topic of euphemism has gained the attention of Arab scholars. Khanfar (2012) researched the topic of

<sup>1</sup> The Cave: 19.

<sup>2</sup> [https://publications-img.qurancomplex.gov.sa/?p=44&mushaf\\_pageno=344&imagewidth=550](https://publications-img.qurancomplex.gov.sa/?p=44&mushaf_pageno=344&imagewidth=550)

euphemism in Arabic, while Ibrahim and Sultan (2009) undertook an extensive study of euphemism in English. The authors of both papers concluded that euphemistic expressions are employed for a broad range of reasons: the wish to avoid a disagreeable or offensive term; the desire to use a more prestigious or elevated term; in order to soften the reality of what is being communicated; and with the intention to distort facts and deceive people. Euphemism can be a useful source for enriching language through the introduction of various new words and phrases, and the changing of old expressions by means of new users, new forms, shortened terms and abbreviations. Euphemisms are divided into various types, classified according to the themes around which they revolve. They generally deal with major themes such as death, illness, sex, politics and others.

Al-Qadi (2009) conducted a sociolinguistic comparison of euphemisms in English and in Arabic. He found that in both English and Arabic, euphemisms are mainly couched in three types of figure of speech: metonymy, synecdoche and circumlocution. Circumlocution is a strategy which involves the employment of more words than necessary to convey a meaning, and in particular with the intention of evading an issue or of speaking in vague rather than precise terms about it. Synecdoche involves the application of part of a phrase or meaning to represent the whole meaning, or conversely and less frequently, the use of a whole to refer to a part of that whole. Meanwhile, metonymy refers to the act of substituting a word for a characteristic or complement to an object for the actual object or idea being referred to. Therefore, metonymy, by definition, is the basic figure of speech used for euphemisms, and is also the one which is most difficult to address in teaching, learning and translation of English or Arabic as a non-native language. Galal (2014) conducted a study in which he compared the use of euphemisms for death in English and in Arabic. The researcher found that the implementation of death euphemisms in these two languages is almost the same, since speakers of both languages tend to refer to death as a better life, a better place and other words to that effect. Rabab'ah, Ghaleb and Al-Qarni (2012) conducted a comparative study of euphemisms in Saudi Arabic and in British English, finding no relationship between euphemism strategy choice and gender. Another significant finding produced by the study is for both languages; speakers resort to direct reference to taboos when handling death, and when referring to lying, but hardly ever do so for bodily functions.

Euphemistic language, as with language in general, is influenced by its users' cultural and religious beliefs, life-styles, and norms. Al-Khasawneh (2018) conducted a comparison of euphemistic strategies used by Saudis and Americans. He concludes that the most frequent strategies used by the Saudis are "part-for-whole, understatement and general-for-specific".

Qanbar (2011) investigated linguistic taboos in Yemeni society and examined ways in which speakers in Yemen tend to avoid being direct when communicating taboos in their speech. She implements the theory of "face" and "politeness" as a criterion in her study. The researcher concludes that the use of taboo can be avoided in Yemeni society by using euphemism, through either substitution or by means of circumlocution and other communication strategies. In another study, Ghounane (2014) deals with linguistic taboos and euphemistic strategies in Algerian society, with a focus on the Telmcen speech community. She concludes that the attitudes of Algerian speakers are linked to certain socio-cultural and psychological factors, including the social norms of the society, the social upbringing of its individuals and the social environment in which they come into contact with each other, in addition to their identity construction and other parameters. The findings also show that Algerian people have developed a rich vocabulary, which includes many euphemistic substitutions among its range. These substitutions can come about as the result of various kinds of societal, psychological and cultural pressures.

In an investigation which ranged from formal to informal language, Al-Shamali (1997) explored the euphemistic expressions used in the Jordan Valley dialect in regard to topics related to death, sickness, mental defects, cancer, and body parts. The study also aimed to identify the most frequent euphemisms in the aforementioned topics, euphemisms which were used by all groups, euphemisms which were used for specific meanings or by specific groups of people, and the effect of the variable of gender on the choice of certain euphemisms. The study concluded that, with the exception of excretory function, the range of taboo topics were violated by the majority of the participants. Al-Shamali (1997) concludes that traditional social variables have an impact on the choice of a certain euphemistic expression. Hence, euphemism is considered to be one type of "amelioration", which mainly focuses on employing socially acceptable words or expressions to replace others that cannot be expressed directly. Almoayidi (2018) goes further in comparing use of euphemisms in two different Saudi dialects: Hijazi and Southern dialects. The description given of the two dialects indicates that the speakers have the same intention in using euphemism to avoid being impolite through being too direct when talking about death, sex, body parts and bodily functions. Besides this result, it was also found that speakers of the two Saudi dialects are inclined to use certain other strategies, such as phonemic replacement, compounding, derivation and deletion, when avoiding directness.

Neaman and Silver (1983) assert that euphemism as a linguistic phenomenon flourishes in relation to religious subjects. Al-Barakati (2013) made an attempt to translate sex-related Quranic euphemisms into English. In addition to this translation, Al-Hamad and Salman (2013) consider a number of traditional Arabic euphemisms which are employed in the Holy Quran, as indicated in Table 1:

TABLE 1  
SOME TRADITIONAL ARABIC EUPHEMISMS USED IN THE HOLY QURAN

Verse in Arabic	Sura and verse number	Verse translated into English	Meaning
"لامستم النساء"	An-Nisa': 43	You have been in contact with women. <sup>3</sup>	Have sexual intercourse.
"فلما قضى زيد منها وترا"	Al-Ahzab: 37	So when Zaid had accomplished his desire from her. <sup>4</sup>	Divorced her.
"كانا يأكلون الطعام"	Al-Ma'idah: 75	They used to eat food. <sup>5</sup>	Used to go to the bathroom

### III. METHODOLOGY

An analytical method was used in this research paper which relied upon the statistical software program SPSS. A multi-axis attitudinal questionnaire was developed which contained 45 euphemistic words and phrases. Within this questionnaire, the participants' degree of knowledge and usage of the selected expressions was measured using a 5-point Likert scale for responses, with the possible answers ranging from: 1, 'I neither know it nor use it'; 2, 'I know it but I do not use it'; 3, 'I know it and I rarely use it'; 4, 'I know it and I usually use it'; to 5, 'I know it and I always use it'.

### IV. STUDY POPULATION

The population identified for the study amounted to 550 individuals, and this sample can be broken down by demographic variables including: gender; age group; residence in a village (rural), governorate or city (urban) area; level of education, ranging from none-grade 9 to doctorate level; employment status, including whether a student, looking for a job, in employment or retired; and marital status, whether married or single. The percentage breakdown of the sample population by each demographic variable is given in Table 2:

TABLE 2  
STUDY POPULATION BREAKDOWN

Variable	Type	Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	308	56.0
	Female	242	44.0
	Sum	550	100
Age	Under 20	27	4.91
	21- 30	150	27.27
	31-40	197	35.82
	41-50	129	23.45
	51 and over	47	8.55
	Sum	550	100
Residence	Village	27	4.91
	Governorate	64	11.64
	City	459	83.45
	Sum	550	100
Level of education	None up to grade 9	6	1.09
	Secondary	85	15.45
	Diploma	44	8.0
	Bachelor	252	45.82
	Master	88	16.0
	Doctorate	75	13.64
	Sum	550	100
Nature of work	Student	120	21.82
	Job-seeker	60	10.90
	Employee	345	62.73
	Retired	25	4.55
	Sum	550	100
Marital status	Married	387	70.36
	Single	163	29.64
	Sum	550	100

### V. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The study incorporates six thematic axes: death, sickness, women, physical traits, unfavorable characteristics and 'other'. Figure 1 below shows the arithmetical mean of findings for frequency of euphemism use across the six axes,

<sup>3</sup> [https://publications-img.qurancomplex.gov.sa/?p=44&mushaf\\_pageno=116&imagewidth=550](https://publications-img.qurancomplex.gov.sa/?p=44&mushaf_pageno=116&imagewidth=550)

<sup>4</sup> [https://publications-img.qurancomplex.gov.sa/?p=44&mushaf\\_pageno=485&imagewidth=550](https://publications-img.qurancomplex.gov.sa/?p=44&mushaf_pageno=485&imagewidth=550)

<sup>5</sup> [https://publications-img.qurancomplex.gov.sa/?p=44&mushaf\\_pageno=152&imagewidth=550](https://publications-img.qurancomplex.gov.sa/?p=44&mushaf_pageno=152&imagewidth=550)

arranged according to the responses of the study sample. It is revealed that euphemistic substitutes for unfavorable qualities are the most known and used, while those for physical features come last. This reveals that the Saudi population shows lower tolerance towards discussing malicious or undesirable human behavior, but feels less reluctant to talk about physical appearance. It is suggested that this finding has much to do with religious background, as Islam shows zero tolerance towards vices, and the glorious Quran stipulates that God created man in the best form and that Muslims should appreciate the work of God.

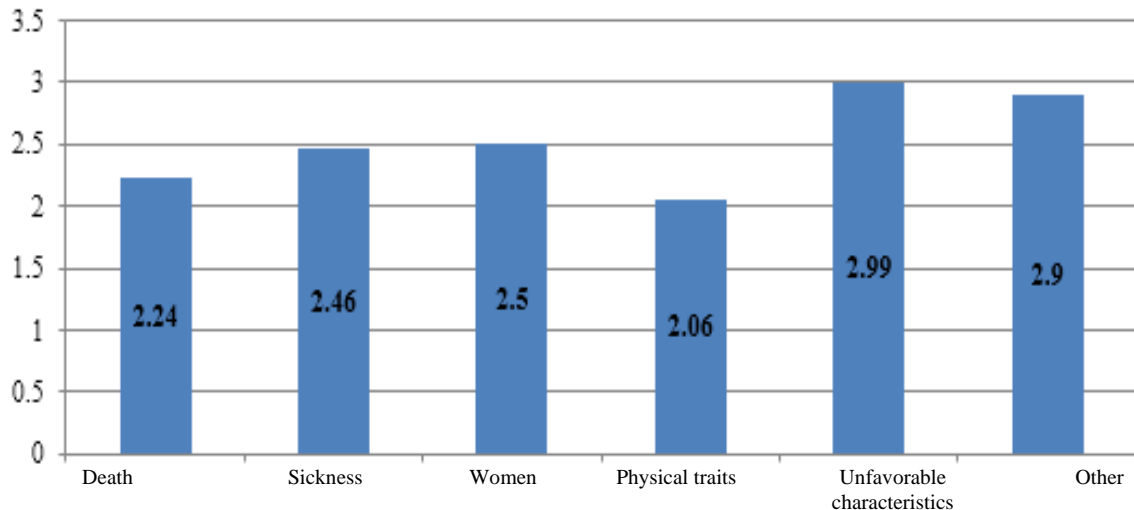


Figure 1. Mean Average Scores for the Six Thematic Axes in Line With the Responses of the Study Sample

The findings recorded from this study reveal a variance in the degree to which each of the 45 euphemistic expressions are known and used in speech. This is shown in Tables 3, 4, 5 & 6, which provide each expression investigated along with its direct meaning, and English translation, and the results for usage:

TABLE 3

SN	Euphemistic expression in Arabic	Literal Meaning in Arabic	Meaning in English	Arithmetic Mean				
				I know it and I always use it	I know it and I usually use it	I know it and I rarely use it	I know it but I do not use it	I neither know it nor use it
1	جاب العيد	أخطأ	Made a mistake		4.11			
2	ثقل دم	شخص ليس له قبول	---		3.81			
3	أبو وجهين	منافق	Two-faced person		3.80			
4	عينه حارة	حسود	Put the evil eye		3.70			
5	وجه قوي	قليل الحياء	Shameless		3.62			
6	لسانه طويل	بذيء الكلام	Use vulgar words		3.59			
7	قعيطي	بخيل	Stingy		3.50			

TABLE 4

SN	Euphemistic expression in Arabic	Literal Meaning in Arabic	Meaning in English	Arithmetic Mean				
				I know it and I always use it	I know it and I usually use it	I know it and I rarely use it	I know it but I do not use it	I neither know it nor use it
8	يعطي من الرخيص	يستخسر	Cheap (person)			3.50		
9	يملح / يبهر الكلام	كاذب	Liar			3.38		
10	ما عليها صلاة	حائض	Has her period			3.37		
11	بائع حياته	متهور	Reckless			3.34		
12	خال	أسمر اللون	Black (person)			3.26		
13	طيب	ضعيف الشخصية	Weak character			3.21		
14	على نياته	ضعيف الشخصية	Weak character			3.11		
15	الأهل	الزوجة	Wife			3.8		
16	علي قد عقله	مرض عقلي	Mental disorder			3.6		
17	أم العيال	الزوجة	Wife			2.98		
18	علي باب الله	فقير	Poor			2.97		
19	ذمته وسبعة	نصاب	Crook			2.94		
20	سبك	عبي	Stupid			2.93		
21	منسم	مريض عقلي	Mental disorder			2.89		
22	ذكي	عبي	Stupid			2.89		
23	يسوقها على الناس	نصاب	Crook			2.84		
24	فلان يطلبكم الحل	توفاه الله	Died			2.83		
25	جلدة	كاذب	Liar			2.82		
26	متخرفن	ضعيف الشخصية أمام المرأة	Weak character when dealing with women			2.81		
27	قربة مشوقة	يفشي السر	Reveal secrets			2.76		
28	زلاية	جبان	Coward			2.85		
29	وجه بارد	قليل الحياء	Shameless			2.64		

TABLE 5

SN	Euphemistic expression in Arabic	Literal Meaning in Arabic	Meaning in English	Arithmetic Mean				
				I know it and I always use it	I know it and I usually use it	I know it and I rarely use it	I know it but I do not use it	I neither know it nor use it
30	جاب راسه	إقناع الآخرين	Persuade				2.59	
31	يده طويلة	سارق	Thief				2.57	
32	بيت الراحة	دورة المياه	W.C.				2.50	
33	ينام مع أهله	الجماع	Have intercourse with his wife				2.49	
34	ماله قلب	جبان	Coward				2.47	
35	عطاه ركية	يخلف الوعد	Break a promise				2.43	
36	البيت	الزوجة	Wife				2.30	
37	لايس ثوب ما هو له	مغرور	Snobbish				2.24	
38	خلق الله حسن	أعور	One-eyed				2.10	
39	يحل الواجب	الجماع	Have intercourse with his wife				2.5	
40	كريم عين	أعور	One-eyed				2.1	
41	عنده مكالمة من سويسرا	قضاء الحاجة	Go to the bathroom				1.94	
42	بخور السوق	يفشي السر	Reveal a secret				1.84	

TABLE 6

SN	Euphemistic expression in Arabic	Literal Meaning in Arabic	Meaning in English	Arithmetic Mean				
				I know it and I always use it	I know it and I usually use it	I know it and I rarely use it	I know it but I do not use it	I neither know it nor use it
43	فلان توسدها	توفاه الله	Died					1.65
44	جاته الرحمة	الزكام	The flu					1.43
45	الشوفة	الزوجة	Wife					1.23

## VI. RESULTS

The findings of the study as presented in the previous section have uncovered that, although slang is generally thought to be obscene and profane, and that the word "vulgar" was originally synonymous to "slang", a good part of slang in fact has a courteous and face-saving component. The results also reveal that modern Saudis are very much acquainted with euphemisms in their language and that they are inclined to employ these in everyday situations wherever appropriate.

In addition, the findings also indicate that the attitudes of speakers towards the use of euphemisms vary according to their gender. It is revealed that women use euphemism more than men, perhaps pointing to greater timidity in language use on the part of women. This is in contrast to the findings of Rabab'ah, Ghaleb and Al-Qarni (2012), which did not find differences in strategic euphemism choice by gender in Saudi Arabic.

Moreover, the attitudes of speakers towards the use of euphemisms vary according to age, with those aged between 31 and 40 making the most extensive use of euphemisms. This is generally the age at which people are at their best in terms of mental and physical concentration and performance.

The study also suggests that the attitudes of speakers towards the use of euphemisms vary according to region. Urban residents use euphemism more than rural residents do. This finding is also normal and rather to be expected, since urban dwellers are considered more 'civilized' than rural and pastoral people, in which the latter group are generally considered to speak rather more freely and naturally.

The attitudes of speakers towards the use of euphemisms is shown in the study to vary based on educational background in the sense that the more educated a person is, the more he or she tends to use euphemism. The study also reveals that Saudis are generally conservative, and thus that they tend to euphemize many topics, such as descriptions of humans, genitals, bodily functions, women, occupations, sickness and death. This is considered to arise because of the potential in Saudi society for offense resulting from the direct use of speech in such events and situations and related to these areas. The findings also suggest that Saudis replace words relating to these topics with less direct expressions to avoid offense or embarrassment.

Based on the findings of the current study, the topic of sex is still the most sensitive and taboo subject from among the themes analyzed, and it is apparent that in general, people try to avoid mentioning this topic in public. Finally, the study finds that the population studied are euphemistic when describing undesirable or malicious human behavior, but feel less reluctant to talk directly about physical appearance. It is concluded that this finding has much to do with the strong religious background of the Saudi population, with Islam showing zero tolerance towards vices while the glorious Quran stipulates that God created man in the best form and that Muslims should appreciate the work of God.

## VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the focus and findings of the current study, it is recommended that similar studies be carried out in different parts of the KSA. This will be useful in order to pinpoint regional variations and to create a more precise geographical picture of the use of euphemistic language across the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Moreover, carrying out work to collect a glossary of euphemistic slang in use in Saudi Arabia would be a useful future direction for researchers in this area.

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