

The Sociolinguistic Analysis of Amharic Euphemisms of Magician

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Abstract

Taboos are proscription of behaviors that people in various cultures forbid to express in public. On the other hand, euphemisms are pleasant cultural linguistic strategies which societies use for displacing offensive expressions. Euphemisms are conventional figures of speech that people in different cultures use to mitigate fear, shame, disgust, disagreements and avoid quarrelsome. However, it violates the cooperative principles. But as the goal of euphemism is to show politeness and to save face, it achieves the politeness principles. Therefore, the main objective of this study is to examine the sociolinguistic analysis of Amharic euphemisms of magicians within the frameworks of politeness and relevance theories. Descriptive qualitative method was used to conduct the study. To achieve those objectives, data were collected from native speakers of Amharic by using semi-structured interview, focus group discussions and introspection. Informants were selected by using snowball and purposive sampling techniques. Results show that native speakers of Amharic in the study areas, in the churches, the mosques, the homes, the schools and the hospitals domains considered that using magic in public is taboo. Instead, they use different euphemistic expressions. In addition, people in the study areas used various euphemistic construction strategies such as metaphor, idiom, borrowing, circumlocution, overstatement and understatement. The findings also indicate that research participants used various mechanisms for the formation of euphemisms to avoid taboo expressions, to minimize conflicts, to build social relationships, to save face as well as to show respect.

Key words: Euphemisms; Euphemistic strategies; Face; Magic; Taboos

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1. INTRODUCTION

One tactic for displaying politeness is the use of euphemisms. Additionally, it portrays the cultures of various regions. It affects how we communicate on a daily basis since it can make uncomfortable expressions more comfortable and abrasive expressions more pleasant. In other words, it preserves dignity on both sides and promotes effective communication. Euphemisms are typically used to conceal, save face, and hide emotions (Samokaite, 2011).

Euphemisms, according to Enright (1985), are very useful for improving communications. Therefore, when people converse without employing euphemisms, especially when discussing sensitive subjects, they have difficulty forming social bonds. In other words, using euphemisms helps people avoid using offensive language while also smoothing down language in relation to minimizing the likelihood of confrontation. The use of a euphemism means speaking in a deceptive manner. It is prevalent among speakers and is present in all communities. Euphemisms are used to express negative things in oblique ways. Euphemisms are mostly used to avoid communicating linguistic taboos and to be courteous (Allan and BurrIDGE, 2006).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Numerous academics have conducted in-depth research on the Amharic language's phonology, morphology,

and syntax. On the semantics and pragmatics of Amharic, there are, nevertheless, few publications. As an illustration, Gashaw (2020) studied “the semantics and pragmatics of spatial expressions in Amharic,” and Gashaw (2021) investigated “conceptions of life and death in Amharic: A View from Cognitive Semantics.” The semantics and pragmatics of Amharic *bəgəna* lyrics were the subject of a study by Tadesse (2020), Baye (1997) studied on “the pragmatics of greetings, felicitations, and condolence expressions in four Ethiopian languages, Derib (2016) investigated on “Metaphors of Time in Amharic,” and Hussen (2017) conducted a research on “the socio-linguistic study of Amharic taboo.” According to Hussen’s research, there are five categories of Amharic taboos: body parts, sexual activities, epithets or disabilities, excrement, and names of people. However, he failed to include taboo subjects in Amhara culture, like magicians. On the other hand, this study found that Amhara culture frowns upon magic. As a result, there has not been any research on the sociolinguistic analysis of Amharic euphemisms for Magicians in many social realms. Besides, Bamlaku, Endalew, and Samuel (2023) did a research on the socio-pragmatic analysis of Amharic euphemisms of women. Their findings show that women’s issues considered as taboos. Hence, people used various euphemistic expressions instead. Additionally, Bamlaku, Samuel, and Endalew (2023) conducted a research on the socio-pragmatic analysis of Amharic euphemisms of sexual organs and sexual acts, and death respectively. Thus, they found that using terms such as sexual organs and sexual acts, and death directly in public created shame and anxiety. In place of these, the people employed different euphemistic expressions. Therefore, as far as the researchers were searched for, there was no research on the sociolinguistic analysis of Amharic euphemisms of magicians. Thus, the researchers were inspired to conduct this research to close the gap.

Since euphemisms have various functions to convey messages by avoiding the taboo expressions, preserving face, forming social ties, and being polite; thorough research ought to be conducted in several languages (Mwanambuyu, 2011, p. 3).

Accordingly, the Amhara people in the study areas constantly instigate arguments with one another by employing forbidden expressions associated with magicians. As a result of employing the exact names of negative magicians, numerous Amhara individuals in the research areas lost their lives. As a result, no research has been done on Amharic euphemisms for magicians. The researchers were inspired to look into the socio-pragmatic examination of Amharic euphemisms for magicians in a variety of social contexts, including churches, houses, mosques, schools, and hospitals.

1.2 Objectives of the study

1.2.1 The general objectives of the study

This study’s main goal is to look into the sociolinguistic analysis of Amharic euphemisms for Magicians. The study aims to do the following things in particular:

- To identify the taboos of magicians and their euphemistic manifestations in various social areas.
- To identify different euphemistic construction techniques
- To determine the reasons why Amharic native speakers in the research areas use euphemisms over taboo words.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Magic is a belief system that proves some actions such as reciting specific word sequences have the ability to directly or indirectly impact supernatural spirits and forces as well as people and the natural world. Rituals particularly those based on occult knowledge are used to control manipulate entities and forces in order to gain an advantage over them (Cook, 2000).

Magic draws on malevolent powers. It is used for malevolent acts or to deliberately cause harm in some way. People who believe in or claim to practice magic use the term to describe the harmful effects of magic that they consider taboo (Cook, 2000). Magic would be involved to kill, injure, or cause destruction, or for personal gain without regard to harmful consequences to others. Magic practice was actively discouraged by the church, but remained widespread in folk religion throughout the medieval period. Magical thinking becomes syncretized with Christian dogma, expressing itself in practices like the judicial duel and relic veneration (Cook, 2000)

In Amhara culture, there are several reasons that calling *t’ānk’aj* ‘magician’ is considered taboo. Firstly, according to the elaboration of informants, the people believed that those who are magicians worship Satan. That is, the Amhara society ignored the magicians because they do not believe in God. Secondly, the attitude of the Amhara people towards magicians is negative because magicians do many bad things to the community. In other words, according to the societies’ beliefs, those wizards create *mātat* ‘witchcraft’ or *wilaf* ‘witchcraft’ to make some people crazy, some people to die, some people are rich with the help of magicians, some people are poor due to wizards’ secret agreement with Satan. The Amhara community strongly hates *t’ānk’aj* ‘magician’ because their wealth is taken by *mātat* ‘witchcraft’ or they call it in Amharic *wəsad* ‘taker’.

2.1 Theoretical frameworks

2.1.1 Relevance theory

Principles of cognition and communication are essential to relevance theory. According to a more constrained communicative interpretation of the cognitive principle, every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance (Sperber and Wilson, 1986). By maximizing relevance, cognitive mechanisms which make up the cognitive system behave in a way that optimizes cost-benefit ratios, or seeks to achieve the greatest benefit at the lowest feasible price. On the other hand, the communicative principle asserts that statements raise the possibility of positive significance. This theory explains how metaphors work in a context to convey the meaning the speaker wishes to get across (Sperber and Wilson, 1986).

This theory, which is founded on the concept that humans have a single highly developed mental ability to select the most pertinent information from incoming inputs, is a pragmatic approach to human communication that is cognition-centered. The theory's central tenet is that humans possess the biological capacity to optimize the relevance of receiving stimuli (linguistic utterances or nonverbal behavior). Relevance is a characteristic of internal representations and thoughts as well as external stimuli, both of which can serve as inputs for cognitive processing (Sperber and Wilson, 1986).

According to the relevance theory, ostensive utterances achieve relevance through imparting knowledge that has contextual impacts on their addressees' cognitive systems. The ostensive stimulus is pertinent enough for the hearer to consider processing it worthwhile. The most pertinent stimulus that is in line with the speaker's skills and preferences is the ostensive stimulus. The speaker has preferences for the language they choose to communicate their ideas; in terms of hiding euphemisms, this means that they like using euphemistic phrases and idioms. Furthermore, the concept of context is crucial to relevance theory since what is relevant is that which permeates the contextual discourse or has concrete contextual impacts. Although recognizing certain elements of both, the fundamental premise behind relevance theory is neither fully psychological nor entirely epistemic. It seeks to provide a theory that is somewhat realistic in terms of psychology and psycholinguistics (Sperber and Wilson, 1986).

The Amhara people in the research areas have a taboo against calling Magicians because of their strong feelings of fear. As a result, many in the study locations avoid using it in public. The Amhara people that reside in the Debre Markos, Lummamie, and Gindewoyin woredas employed acceptable, relevant, and courteous terms to refer to Magicians in order to avoid using taboo words. To save face and be courteous, society should therefore employ appropriate and relevant euphemisms to replace wizards or magicians.

2.1.2 Politeness theory

This study used the politeness theory, which Brown and Levinson (1987) introduced, to illustrate politeness in its broadest sense. In other words, keeping both a positive face and a negative face during conversation is something that all interlocutors are motivated to do. They are regarded as having produced the most significant and thorough work on pragmatic politeness theory. Because of things like distance between participants, their relative rank, and the formality of the context, people choose which manners to utilize in a given situation (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

Politeness is a universal concept. Every language and culture has a manner of expressing deference, refraining from forbidden language, maintaining one's dignity, and lessening the impact of offensive language (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Thus, the primary motivation for using euphemistic expressions is to demonstrate politeness. Therefore, the Amhara society in the research areas uses a variety of euphemistic construction strategies, such as understatement, overstatement, metaphor, idiom, and borrowing to demonstrate respect, mitigate the negative power of the taboo word death, and demonstrate politeness.

In a nutshell, politeness theory and relevance theory are related in their pragmatic approach to euphemisms. In other words, courtesy is the primary driving force behind indirect speech acts. Euphemisms are used to express courtesy and preserve the listener's good impression. Similar to this, using acceptable and relevance expressions are signs of courtesy and helps keep the listener's face on. In order to find the most relevant information from incoming inputs, politeness theory does just that. Euphemisms, relevance theory, and politeness theory are all related. For instance, listeners and audiences experience less loss and suffering when people use appropriate euphemisms to describe magicians. In other words, the more appropriate euphemisms people employ, the more they appear courteous and save the listeners' faces.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research method was descriptive-qualitative. The goal of qualitative research is to verbally describe complex experiences. In the same way, euphemisms are complex phenomena that require verbal explanation to communicate their intended meaning (Patton, 2002). As a result, this study used a descriptive-qualitative methodology.

The first-hand information was gathered from Amharic native speakers in the Debre Markose, Lumammie, and Gindewoyin woredas. In order to choose informants and research sites, the researcher used purposive and snowball sampling strategies. According to Llamas (2007), persons

who employ probability sampling techniques like simple random sampling are unable to tell the difference between volunteers and non-volunteers or native speakers and non-native speakers. In contrast, while using the purposive and snowball sampling procedures, the researchers are aware of the kind of speakers needed for the study and look for speakers who meet particular requirements to fill in specific quotas. Therefore, the researchers used these sample strategies.

Focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews, and introspection were utilized by the researcher as data collection tools to obtain information from informants.

Using the study's goals as a guide, qualitative analysis was used to examine the informant data. It took numerous procedures to analyze the data. The researcher's first step was to comprehend the data on euphemisms that had been gathered. Then, using a semi-structured interview, every word and phrase was listed and confirmed. In addition to these, the researcher discovered the various euphemistic construction strategies, identified the taboo expressions and their euphemistic expressions in the different social domains, and identified the reasons why native Amharic speakers in the study areas use euphemisms rather than them.

Euphemisms related to magician

Magic is a religious belief that certain behaviors such as reciting specific word combinations have the capacity to influence and control both humans and the natural environment either directly or by calling upon supernatural spirits and forces. In order to control or influence creatures and forces for one's own gain rituals particularly those based on esoteric knowledge are used (Cook, 2000). In Amhara culture, there are some cases that calling *t'ank'aj* 'magician' is considered taboo. Firstly, according to the information from informants, the people believe that those who are magicians worship Satan. That is, the Amhara society ignored the magicians because they do not believe in God. Secondly, the attitude of the Amhara people towards magicians is negative because wizards do many bad things to the community. In other words, according to the societies' beliefs, those magicians create *matat* 'witchcraft' or *wilaf* 'witchcraft' to make some people crazy, some people to die, some people are rich with the help of wizards, some people are poor due to magicians' secret agreement with Satan. The Amhara community strongly hates *t'ank'aj* 'magician' because their wealth is taken by *matat* 'witchcraft' or they call it in Amharic *wasadz* 'taker'. Due to the above reasons, calling *t'ank'aj* 'magician' in public is taboo. Instead, the people employ the following euphemisms:

(1)

a. *ja- midir awak'i*

GEN- earth know-er

Lit: 'one who is the wise of earth'.

'One who is a magician'.

b. *awak'i*

Knowledgeable

Lit: 'one who is a knowledgeable'.

'One who is a magician'

c. *kokab k'ot'ari*

star counter

Lit: 'one who is a star counter'.

'One who is a magician'.

d. *k'it'al bat't'af*

leaf cutter

Lit: 'one who is a leaf cutter'.

'One who is a magician'.

e. *t'at'ar t'aj*

pebble fell

Lit: 'one who is a pebble feller'.

'One who is a magician'.

f. *t'ila wagi*

shade thruster

Lit: 'one who is a shade thruster'.

'One who is a magician'

g. *dabtara*

clergy man

Lit: 'one who is a clergy man'.

'One who is a magician'.

h. *ja- bahil awak'i*

GEN- traditional know-er

'One who is a traditional know-er'.

'One who is a magician'.

i. *awda nigist gəlatf*

holy book turner

'One who turns a holy book'.

'One who is a magician'.

People do not utilize the direct name of *t'ank'aj* 'magician' in churches and homes, according to respondents' responses. Instead, they use overstatement, as seen in (1a) and (1b). As a result, the euphemistic expression in (1a) actually denotes someone who is wise on earth. But, in this context, the expression's conventional connotation refers to a magician. In the Amhara culture, some people believe that someone who is *t'ank'aj* 'magician' know lot of things on earth. They also consider magicians as second God because they think that magicians knew everything. Thus, since calling of *t'ank'aj* 'magician' in public is a fearful and shameful taboo; the people in the study areas use the expression in (1a) to conceal the taboo word.

The expression used in (1b) actually implies a wise person. This expression is employed in home, church, hospital, school and mosque settings. Nonetheless, this

expression's context-specific meaning denotes a magician. Culturally, the Amhara people think that wizards have gifts that can communicate with Satan. They can also do a number of things. That is, they can make someone healthy, they can make someone abnormal, and they can make someone a clever student and so on. Therefore, to avoid shame and fear the Amhara society uses the expression in (1b).

The expression used in (1c) is circumlocution. It is used by elder males and females, in home settings. Its actual meaning refers to a star counter. Yet, the contextual interpretation of this phrase is wizard. The Amhara community believes that magicians ask those who believe in Satan about their star. Thus, after knowing their star, magicians tell everything about the believers. The people in the study areas are afraid of calling *t'ank'aj* 'magician' in public because they harm many people. So, the society uses the euphemistic expression in (1c) to mitigate fear and to avoid disagreements.

The expression used in (1d) directly refers to a leaf-cutter. This idiomatic expression is used in home and school settings. Hence, this expression's idiomatic and common meanings reveal a magician. Culturally, the Amhara society believes that magicians have their own leaf that makes them to know about everything. If magicians have the so called leaf, they know about everything. Thus, calling *t'ank'aj* 'magician' in public is taboo because magician hurt a number of people in the areas. The community preferably uses the expression in (1d) to live in harmony.

The expression in (1e) is an idiom which is used in church, home and school settings. A pebble feller is the direct meaning of this expression. Nonetheless, its context-based connotation points to a magician. In Amhara culture, the people believe that magicians use pebble to talk about everything. That is, magicians request many people to provide pebble for receiving many things from them. In short, since magicians believe in pebble, the Amhara society of the research areas uses the expression in (1e) instead of calling *t'ank'aj* 'magician'.

Language users in church and home settings also employed the idiomatic expression as in (1f) which translates to shade thruster in its direct form. Yet, this expression's idiomatic meaning is wizard. In the Amhara culture, the society thinks that magicians make people to die. The kind of disease that they use is called *tilawagi* 'shade thruster'. Therefore, because calling the direct name of *t'ank'aj* 'magician' is a fear and shame-based taboo. The people use the expression in (1f) to conceal it as well as to show respect.

The expression (1g) is an idiom which is used in church, home, and school domains. Its literal meaning refers to one who is a clergy man. But the conventional meaning depicts one who is a magician. According to informants' reactions, the people believe that magicians

are literates of the church education. They know Geez and other church education very well. That is why the community uses the expression in (1g) instead of calling *t'ank'aj* 'magician'. Thus, elder men and women therefore avoided the taboo word, saved face, and showed civility by using those euphemisms in both urban and rural settings.

Language users in the context of hospital, home, school church and mosque settings do not use the term *t'ank'aj* 'magician' in public. Instead, they employ circumlocution such as (1h). This euphemistic expression refers to someone who is a conventional know-er in its literal sense. Nonetheless, the expression's context-specific meanings reveal that the person is a magician. Some people of Amhara believe that wizards are like doctors. But they are traditional know-res because when they go to magicians' houses to get health, they will give a lot of traditional medicine that helps the believers to get healthy. So, language users use the expression in (1h). Therefore, this expression was employed by language users to show respect for audiences and to establish interpersonal bonds between participants and customers.

Elderly illiterate men and women who reside in rural areas, in church, home and school settings utilize circumlocution like in (1i) rather than pronouncing the word *t'ank'aj* 'magician'. This expression's literal meaning describes someone who turns a holy book. Yet, this expression's context-specific meaning refers to a magician. In the Amhara culture, the people think that magicians are those who know the holy book and they also know God's rules and regulations well. Thus, the Amhara community of the research areas uses the expression in (1i). Hence, this euphemistic expression is used by research participants in the study locations to demonstrate respect, to soften the impact of the prohibited word, and to maintain face.

CONCLUSION

This study looked into how language users in the study areas used different euphemistic expressions for magician using politeness and relevance theories. Relevance theory and politeness theory are interrelated. That is to say, when people use the best relevant expression to mitigate the power of the harsh word, they maximize their relationship with the society. Similarly, using politeness strategies to avoid the taboo expressions reduce the harmful effects of the unpleasant words. As a result, the society lives in harmony by using euphemistic expressions as expressed in the analysis section.

Research participants used a variety of euphemistic terms in the study settings, including churches, residences, schools, mosques, and hospitals, according to respondents' responses. To put it another way, the term magician is considered as taboo in the study locations. Instead, the

people employed various euphemistic expressions.

Language users employed a variety of euphemistic construction techniques, including idiom, metaphor, circumlocution, understatement, and overstatement. These euphemistic building techniques were adopted by the Amhara people to replace the taboo expression. In order to avoid using taboo terminology, maintain their dignity, and be courteous, people in the research areas adopted these euphemistic formulation techniques.

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