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Lexical Strategies for Addressing Sensitive Issues in Urdu Print Media

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Abstract: This article examines the use of euphemisms and taboo lexicon in Urdu newspaper discourse, focusing on how language is tactically employed to address culturally sensitive topics such as sexuality, religion, politics, death, and violence. Through a linguistic analysis of selected newspaper texts, the study uncovers common euphemistic expressions and lexical choices that reflect efforts to adhere to societal norms and avoid offense. It highlights the role of indirectness, metaphor, and cultural context in shaping media language, revealing how Urdu newspapers navigate the boundaries of appropriateness in public communication. The article contributes to the fields of sociolinguistics and media studies by shedding light on the complex interplay between language, culture, and the representation of taboo in Pakistani journalism.

Introduction: Mass media-particularly the press and, more specifically, newspapers-not only serve as a primary conduit for information dissemination but also play a significant role in shaping linguistic culture. In societies deeply rooted in religious beliefs, traditions, and cultural norms, language systems frequently employ various stylistic devices to navigate sensitive topics. Among these, euphemisms are especially prevalent, used to soften expressions that might otherwise be deemed socially or morally inappropriate. Euphemisms enable speakers and writers to refer to controversial or uncomfortable subjects in a culturally acceptable manner. In contrast, the taboo lexicon consists of words or phrases that are explicitly avoided in public discourse due to their association with sexuality, politics, religion, or other socially sensitive domains.

This article offers a linguistic analysis of euphemistic and taboo expressions found in Urdu newspaper language. Taboo itself is a culturally driven phenomenon that manifests across various aspects of human interaction, including language. As noted in numerous linguistic and anthropological studies, the term "taboo" originates from the Tongan language of the Polynesian islands, where it referred to sacred or forbidden entities-items or ideas that were not only untouchable but also unspeakable.

Australian linguists Keith Allan and Kate Burridge categorize taboo vocabulary into several key groups: bodies and their effluvia (sweat, snot, faeces, menstrual fluid, etc.); the organs and acts of sex, micturition and defecation; diseases, death and killing (including hunting and fishing); naming, addressing, touching and viewing persons and sacred beings, objects and places; food gathering, preparation and consumption. These categories reflect a society's underlying social, religious, and moral values, which shape the development and use of taboo words. Euphemisms are primarily used to express unpleasant or negative realities in a softened form. They serve to present sensitive issues in a way that is aesthetically, socially, and culturally acceptable, thus preserving decorum in public discourse.

In Urdu journalism, euphemisms serve as a vital linguistic tool, allowing sensitive subjects to be addressed in a culturally respectful manner. Rather than opting for direct and potentially jarring expressions, writers often choose softer, more socially

acceptable alternatives. These euphemisms are not merely stylistic choices; they reflect broader cultural, religious, and moral values, helping maintain social harmony and emotional sensitivity in public discourse.

Reporting on death in the Urdu press is typically handled with great care. Direct phrases like مر گیا (mar gaya, "he died") are avoided in favor of more respectful expressions such as انتقال کر گئے (intiqāl kar gaye, "passed away") or الله کو پیارا ہو گیا (Allah ko pyara ho gaya, "became beloved to God"). These euphemisms soften the finality of death and often reflect religious beliefs about the afterlife. Similarly, the deceased are respectfully referred to as مرحوم / مرحومہ (marhoom / marhooma), emphasizing reverence and dignity.

Political reporting in Urdu media often employs diplomatic and indirect language to discuss controversial issues. Rather than stating that a government has failed (حکومت ناکام ہو گئی), journalists may report that حکومت کو چیلنجز درپیش ہیں ("the government is facing challenges"). Accusations of corruption are reworded as مالی بے ضابطگیاں ہوئیں ("financial irregularities occurred"), and flawed decisions are described as needing reconsideration (فیصلے پر نظرثانی کی ضرورت ہے). This cautious language allows criticism without overt confrontation, which is particularly important in politically sensitive environments.

Topics related to sexuality, menstruation, or childbirth are often approached indirectly in Urdu media. For example, جنسی تعلقات (sexual relations) may be referred to as ناجائز تعلقات (illicit relations). While such language preserves modesty, it can also obscure the severity of the issue and perpetuate stigmas, especially around victims of sexual violence.

Urdu journalistic language concerning illness or disability is generally marked by empathy and respect. Direct labels such as اندھا (blind) or پاگل (mentally ill) are replaced with more considerate expressions like روشنی سے محروم ("deprived of light") or دماغی مریض ("mentally unwell"). These euphemisms emphasize dignity and seek to reduce social stigma, signaling a more inclusive and humane approach to reporting on health-related issues.

CONCLUSION

The widespread use of euphemism in Urdu journalism illustrates a complex interplay between language, cultural norms, and ethical considerations. Euphemisms help journalists convey sensitive information without offending readers or breaching societal decorum. They serve to uphold emotional sensitivity, reinforce social values, and ensure respectful communication.

However, excessive reliance on euphemistic language can dilute the impact of reporting, particularly when addressing urgent social problems, political corruption, or violence. Therefore, the challenge lies in striking a balance-employing euphemisms where cultural sensitivity demands it, while maintaining enough clarity to ensure transparency and accountability.

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