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Effects of gender and degree of formality on the use of euphemistic strategies in Iraqi Arabic

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Although euphemism has been studied in many Arabic dialects, it has not yet received due attention in Iraqi Arabic (IA). This study investigates the use of euphemistic strategies by IA speakers and the effect of gender and degree of formality on the use of these strategies. In order to achieve these objectives, a discourse completion test (DCT) was developed and distributed to 160 (80 males and 80 females) Iraqi university students. The data were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively using strategies adopted from a number of previous frameworks. The findings show that the participants used a variety of euphemistic strategies, with the *deletion* strategy being the most frequently used when talking about the topic of death, the *fuzzy words* strategy for the topic of mental illness, and the *implication* strategy for the topic of obesity. The analysis also revealed that the degree of formality plays a key role in the use of euphemistic strategies in the topic of mental illness and that gender plays an effective role in the use of euphemistic strategies in all three topics.

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Introduction

Research in the field of Arabic linguistics has mainly centred on studying the structure of various Arabic dialects (e.g., Jarrah et al., 2021), grammaticalization of discourse markers (e.g., Harb et al., 2022), metadiscourse features of the Arabic text (e.g., Alghazo et al., 2021; Rabab'ah et al., 2022) and the realisation of speech acts (e.g., Alghazo et al., 2021). However, pragmatic uses of certain linguistic structures in the dialects of Arabic have been less explored and more so in Iraqi Arabic (IA). Of these pragmatic expressions is euphemism which is generally defined as the use of softening words to describe unpleasant situations so as not to offend people (Enright, 1985). Allan and Burridge (2006, p. 1) describe euphemism as “sweet talking” which includes “words or phrases used as an alternative to a dispreferred expression” (p. 32). Rawson (1981, p. 1) notes that euphemisms “conceal the things people fear the most—death, the dead, the supernatural. They cover up the facts of life—of sex and reproduction and excretion.” Bolinger (1980, pp. 72-73) emphasises the role of language in manipulating the minds and emotions of people and sees loaded words as euphemistic because “they picture what they designate in a favorable ... way.” He further explains that “[a] euphemism is most apt to be noticed if it is new” and that if a lowly occupation “wants to come up in the world, it may try to shed the name that signaled its humble status.” Indeed, euphemism refers to people’s selection of loaded words which do not cause harm to others in sensitive situations. It is a device used to avoid embarrassment and impoliteness.

Euphemism is a universal phenomenon that is found in all languages. However, every language manifests different forms and strategies of euphemism. The role of euphemism in politeness theory is indispensable (Brown and Levinson, 1987). It is a means through which people save their or others’ faces. Despite the wealth of research on euphemism in many Arabic dialects, it has not received the attention it deserves in Iraqi Arabic (IA). This study examines euphemistic strategies in IA, a variety of Arabic that is little-researched, as noted earlier. It essentially examines how IA speakers save face (for speakers and interlocutors) through the use of euphemistic strategies. It also examines the effect of formality and gender on the use of euphemistic strategies. The following research questions are formulated to achieve the study objectives:

1. What are the euphemistic strategies used by Iraqi speakers when they refer to topics of death, mental illness, and obesity?
2. What is the effect of formality and gender on the use of euphemistic strategies by Iraqi Arabic speakers?

Literature review

Studies on euphemism in Arabic. There are some studies that examined the use of euphemistic strategies in some Arabic dialects. In Egyptian Arabic, for example, Enab, (2020) explored euphemism in relation to physical illness, inferior career, cancer, bodily functions, sensitive issues for women, and death. In her study, 275 Egyptians were asked to choose the euphemistic utterances in the absence and existence of face-threatening acts (FTAs). The researcher analysed the data according to the euphemism’s classification of Allan and Burridge, (1991). The findings show that Egyptian participants largely use euphemisms in the existence of FTAs when they speak about sensitive issues. Additionally, Egyptians employ euphemistic strategies such as *understatement*, *general-for-specific*, *hyperbole*, *borrowing*, *circumlocution*, and *technical jargon*.

Khanfar, (2012) analysed selected examples from Modern Standard Arabic and IA aiming to show the types and forms of

the euphemistic expressions in Arabic. Khanfar, (2012) found that Arabic speakers try to avoid bad terms when referring to affairs, concepts, and activities. Regarding politics and sex, euphemisms in Arabic are used in order to express their criticism, irony, and mocking as indirect tools. Moreover, Khanfar, (2012, p. 22) stated that Arabic borrows some loanwords as euphemisms; for example, in IA, /langa/ and /ba:la / “are used as jargon (to refer to a certain registrant) in the economic setting.” In Saudi Arabia, Almoayidi, (2018) examined the use of euphemism in the Hijazi and Southern region dialects spoken in Saudi Arabia and found that *fuzzy words* and *metaphor* were the most used strategies. He also found the people choose different expressions according to their gender and age.

Altakhaineh and Rahrouh, (2015) investigated the use of euphemistic strategies by 80 Arab EFL students. The researchers asked the participants of to answer the test based on two topics: physical appearance and courtesy. The results showed that EFL learners have little to no knowledge of the euphemisms used in English. Additionally, there appeared a difference between females’ and males’ use of euphemisms. For instance, regarding the physical appearance topic, females were more aware of a euphemism because of the reflection of the Arabic society. Additionally, there was little awareness by advanced and intermediate English speakers, and in fact, the researchers presented an important recommendation that teachers should take serious steps to raise EFL learners’ awareness of euphemisms used in English and their significance in everyday conversation.

Other studies were comparative in nature. For example, Almufawez et al., (2018) conducted a contrastive study on the use of euphemisms in Arabic and English using two forms of a nine-topic questionnaire which was distributed to 20 Saudi and 20 American participants. They found that the Saudi and American participants used different strategies for cultural and social reasons. For example, Saudi speakers were found to use religious words to talk about bad news and to lie to avoid hurting the feelings of their listeners. On the other hand, American speakers prefer to state bad news frankly when they cannot use euphemistic expressions and use euphemism more than Saudi speakers do regarding some topics. The findings also revealed that both languages are influenced with respect to euphemism by cultural and religious norms.

Alghazo et al., (2021) conducted a contrastive analysis of the use of euphemistic strategies in Algerian Arabic and American English in reference to three topics: death, lying, and disease. In their study, only degree of formality was considered to see how register impacts on the use of euphemistic strategies. The researcher used a DCT to collect responses from 42 participants (21 from each language) and SPSS to analyse the data. The results showed that each group of participants used different strategies when referring to the tabooed topics. For example, the Americans used *synonyms* and *part-for-whole* in the topic of death, while the Algerians used *overstatement*, *part-for-whole*, and *synonyms*. Other differences were found in the use of euphemistic strategies in the other two topics. The study concluded that these differences are attributed to the different cultures behind the two languages.

Mugair (2014) compared the use of euphemism and dysphemism in political speeches in English and Arabic. Based on selected examples, the study showed that three aspects differentiate political euphemism from other types. Pragmatically, the discussed how all maxims of Grice’s cooperative principle are violated to achieve political euphemisms. Linguistically, the study made available evidence that “language is not only a reflection of the objective world but a process of social construction” (p. 118). Three figures of speech were found in the two languages, namely

Metonymy, Synecdoche, and Circumlocution. *Metonymy* is mostly generated in the two languages. English also uses *Abbreviations, Hyperboles, Remodelling, Clipping, and Acronyms* to produce euphemism. This study demonstrated that euphemism is a common feature in natural languages.

Rabab'ah and Al-Qarni, (2012) examined the euphemistic strategies used in Saudi Arabic and British English by distributing a questionnaire which contained six scenarios about three taboo subjects (lying, bodily functions, and death) to 300 participants. The findings revealed that the Saudi participants used certain euphemism strategies, such as *overstatement, part-for-whole, deletion, understatement, general-for-specific, metaphor, and jargon*. The British participants used *general-for-specific, learned words and jargon, metaphors, deletion, and understatement*. As for the effect of gender, the male Saudi participants euphemized the two subjects of intoxication and death with the euphemistic strategies of *overstatement* being used with the topic of death and *fuzzy words* being used for the topic of intoxication while the females used the *part-for-whole* strategy for the topic of death, and *deletion* for the topic of intoxication topic. The study also showed that the British participants euphemized more topics such as death, mental conditions, and stinginess, and that *synonyms, learned words and jargon* and *part-for-whole* were the main strategies used by the British males and *deletion* and *general-for-specific* by the females. As for the effect of formality, the British participants were more respectful in formal rather than informal settings. This gave rise to a change of strategies from *deletion* to *synonym, reversal* to *general-for-specific*, and *part-for-whole* to *understatement* strategies on the topics of death, mental conditions, and stinginess. For the Saudis, the participants shifted from the *general-for-specific* to *deletion* on the topics of body functions and stinginess only.

Studies on euphemism in Iraqi Arabic. Compared to other dialects of Arabic, there has been a paucity of research on euphemism in IA. Mahdi and Eesa, (2019) conducted a study that investigated the use of euphemistic strategies in Iraqi political discourse. The researchers collected a group of speeches about the Iraqi situation and analysed them using critical discourse analysis. The researchers found that political leaders use a variety of euphemistic strategies in their speeches to be more effective and persuasive. The study concluded that the context of British English involves semantic devices described as “cognitive and mental factors” when they euphemize a war as “a conflict”, “an action”, “a job”, and “a battle”. According to the Iraqi context, it contains the *overstatement* strategy; for example, “from Allah”, “with the help of Allah”, “by will of Allah”, “*mujahedeen*” (holy fighters) and “*jihad*” (holy fighting) are phrases seen as “religious garment”.

Obaid and Seger, (2020) conducted a study in the northwest of Baghdad, more specifically in the Al-Anbar province in order to investigate euphemisms to refer to two topics: cancer and death. The data were collected from 50 participants. The tool for data collection consisted of questionnaire that included 15 questions and three to five answers. The researchers concluded that the speakers in the province of Al-Anbar used euphemistic expressions to talk about death and cancer; for example, they use an alternative expression such as *الله إلى رحمة الله* instead of *مات*, *هذاك* (martyred) for the soldier who is killed in wars, *مرض الخبيث* and *المرض* instead of cancer. The study found that there was a reflection of Islamic principles when the people used euphemistic expressions with others. The researchers believed that the expressions of death show “a smooth meaning that this is not the end of the deceased’s life, but that the departed transferred to the mercy of God, and this idea leads the thought

of the hearer that the dead will find more merciful and peaceful place than that in his life” (Obaid and Seger, 2020, p. 418). Additionally, they argued that “using positive expressions is what the society should present for the patients to help them to face the pain of cancer as a self-support.”

Strategies of euphemism. Allan and Burrige (1991, p. 14) argue that “euphemisms can be achieved through antithetical means... and also by one-for-one substitution; by the use of learned terms or technical jargon instead of common terms; and by the use of colloquial instead of formal terms.” Warren, (1992, 134) classified the source of euphemisms into two innovations: formal innovation and semantic innovation. Warren, (1992) shows that euphemism is constructed by means of formal and semantic formulas. He lists 17 strategies grouped into four primary categories, as follows:

- The first category involves the use of word-formation devices: (1) compounding, (2) derivation, (3) blends, (4) acronyms, and (5) Onomatopoeia.
- The second category includes the phonemic modification processes: (1) back slang, (2) rhyming slang, (3) phoneme replacement, and (4) abbreviation.
- The third category refers to the use of loan words which show “learnedness and matter-of-factness” (p. 133).
- The fourth category represents the semantic construction of euphemism and includes strategies of (1) particularizations, (2) implications, (3) metaphors, (4) metonyms, (5) reversals, (6) understatements, and (7) overstatements.

In addition to these main strategies, Warren, (1992) argues that euphemism can be constructed by deletion (omission) or replacement “by some unarticulated noise in speech” (p. 133). Moreover, other frameworks (e.g., Allan and Burrige, 1991, 2006; Neaman and Silver, 1983; Huang, 2005) included additional strategies that were not mentioned in Warren’s (1992) taxonomy. For example, Allan and Burrige, (1991, p. 16) presents ‘clipping’ as a euphemistic strategy which refers to removing part of a tabooed word. a piece of a taboo word. They also include ‘replacement’ or ‘quasi-omissions’ as a strategy in written language where the tabooed word is replaced by a quasi-omission that is non-lexical (p. 17). Huang, (2005) adds the use of ‘learned words’ and ‘jargons’ as strategies where a technical term is used instead of the tabooed word and ‘nurseryism’ which refers to the use of childlike forms. Allan and Burrige, (2006, p. 48) include ‘synonymy’ as a euphemistic strategy. Finally, Neaman and Silver (1983, p. 11) add the use of ‘a diminutive’ which refers to the use of a form that indicates affection. is adapting the tabooed word by adding a suffix indicating smallness or affection.

Methodology

Sample and population. A sample of 160 undergraduate students aged 18–25 from the School of Pharmacy at Al-Zaytoonah University, Jordan, were recruited. They were all native speakers of IA. The sample included 80 male and 80 female Iraqi participants. The selected topics were based on the cultural, social, and conventional taboos that are mentioned by Abrantes, (2005, p. 91), as follows:

- Fear-Based (e.g., death, and mental illness)
- Shamed-Based (e.g., body functions)
- Politeness-Based (e.g., obesity)

In this study, we selected the three topics of death, mental illness, obesity because they are the most frequently tabooed topics in the Arabic culture.

Data collection instrument. A discourse completion test (DCT) was used to collect the data. The DCT was adapted from Raba-b'ah and Al-Qarni, (2012). The researchers used an open item free-response structure. For each situation, the participants were asked to write down three commonly used utterances under four different scenarios. The DCT included two parts. In the first part, the Iraqi participants were asked to reveal their gender. In the second section, the researchers prepared 16 conversational situations that would help determine which euphemistic strategies are used by IA speakers to refer to tabooed terms, namely death, mental illness, and obesity. Each topic consisted of four conversational situations (two formal and two informal) to emphasize the use of strategies for each variable. These four scenarios were chosen to investigate the impact of formality, the choice of euphemistic strategies, and the variations of strategies used between the scenarios.

Data analysis. After the written DCT responses had been collected, frequency tables and percentages were created to investigate the most frequently utilized strategy in relation to the three topics used by IA speakers. The data which included 63 euphemistic expressions were quantitatively analysed. The researchers read all of the responses and classified them manually: Each euphemistic strategy was counted in terms of both number and percentage. For the analysis, the framework used is based on previous related studies in the literature on euphemism (e.g., Warren, 1992; Allan and Burridge, 1991, 2006; Neaman and Silver, 1983; Huang, 2005). The categorizations were based on how each strategy was defined. Each sample was reviewed separately, and the expressions were classified into strategies which were also sub-classified into formal and informal strategies

Validity and reliability. To ensure the questionnaire's validity, the DCT was given to two professors in the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Jordan. The professors checked the suitability of the situations selected and ensured that the variables considered in the study are clearly reflected in the content and language of the situations. To maximize reliability, the classifications of responses were given to two referees from the University of Technology-Baghdad and one from Mustansiriyah University to check whether or not the classification of each expression is accurate. The referees' suggestions and recommendations were taken into consideration to achieve the final classification of each strategy.

Findings

The use of euphemistic strategies in Iraqi Arabic. The first research question asked about the euphemistic strategies used by IA speakers in the topics of death mental illness, and obesity. Below is a presentation of the results related to each topic.

Topic one: death. The analysis shows that the Iraqi students use different euphemistic strategies when they refer to death such as *overstatement*, *deletion*, *part-for-whole*, *borrowing*, *synonym*, *compounding*, *general-for-specific* and *flippancies*. Table 1 below presents the results.

The *overstatement* strategy ranked first with a frequency of (239) tokens and a percentage of (24.89%). It appears in responses such as /?ilbaqijjah fi ha:ja:tak/ "the rest of his/her life for you." The *deletion* strategy ranked second with a frequency of (105) tokens and a percentage of (10.93%). It appears in responses such as /simi'it bi fla:n/ "have you heard about him?". The lowest strategies used by Iraqi students are the *metaphor* strategy and *general-for-specific* strategy. The *flippancy*

Table 1 Frequencies and percentages of the euphemistic strategies used by iraqi males and females in referring to death.

Strategies	Frequencies	Percentages
Overstatement	239	24.89%
Deletion	105	10.93%
Part-for-whole	71	7.39%
Borrowing	46	4.79%
Synonym	36	3.75%
Compounding	12	1.25%
General-for- specific	7	0.72%
Flippancies	4	0.41%
Taboo	120	12.5%
No response	320	33.33%
Total	960	100%

Table 2 Frequencies and percentages of the euphemistic strategies used by iraqi males and females in referring to mental illness.

Strategies	Frequencies	Percentages
fuzzy words	122	12.70%
General-for- specific	120	12.5%
Implication	63	6.56%
Deletion	62	6.45%
Technical Jargon	60	6.25%
Understatement	16	1.66%
Overstatement	7	0.72%
Taboo	72	7.5%
No response	438	45.66%
Total	960	100%

strategy ranked last with a frequency of (4) tokens and a percentage of (0.41%). It appears in responses such as /qrat^s ?ilhabil/ "bite a rope". The *general-for-specific* strategy ranked seventh with a frequency of (7) tokens and a percentage of (0.72%). It appears in responses such as /?ala'na:r bi:d ?alla:h/ "ages are in Allah's hands."

Topic two: mental illness. The analysis shows that the Iraqi students use different euphemistic strategies when referring to mental illness such as *fuzzy words*, *general-for-specific*, *implication*, *deletion*, *technical jargon*, *understatement*, and *overstatement*. Table 2 below presents the findings.

The *fuzzy words* strategy ranked first with a frequency of (122) tokens and a percentage of (12.70%). It appears in responses such as /?indha: mu'jkilih/ "she has a problem." The *general-for-specific* strategy ranked second with a frequency of (120) tokens and a percentage of (12.5%). It appears in responses such as /mari:d^s/ "sick". The lowest strategies used by Iraqi students are the *overstatement* strategy and *understatement* strategy. The *overstatement* strategy ranked last with a frequency of (7) tokens and a percentage of (0.72%). It appears in responses such as /marad^s ?assa'fa:dah/ "the illness of happiness". The *understatement* strategy ranked sixth with a frequency of (16) tokens and a percentage of (1.66%). It appears in responses such as /?indha: naq^s/ "she has a deficit."

Topic three: obesity. The results show that the Iraqi students use different euphemistic strategies when they refer to obesity such as *implication*, *overstatement*, *particularization*, *compounding*,

reversal, deletion, understatement and metaphor. Table 3 shows these results.

The *implication* strategy ranked first with a frequency of (176) tokens and a percentage of (18.33%). It appears in responses such as /ʔilʕab rija:dʕah/ “do exercises.” The *overstatement* strategy ranked second with a frequency of (88) tokens and a percentage of (9.16%). It appears in responses such as /matru:s/, /malja:n/, and /ʔimdahdah/ which mean “filled.” The lowest strategies used by Iraqi students include the *metaphor* and *understatement* strategy. The *metaphor* strategy ranked last with a frequency of (9) tokens and a percentage of (0.93%). It appears in responses such as /barmi:l/ “barrel.” The *understatement* strategy ranked seventh with a frequency of (17) tokens and a percentage of (1.77%). It appears in responses such as /mitʕa:fi/ “you look healthy.”

The effect of degree of formality and gender on the use of euphemistic strategies. The second question asked about the effect of formality and gender on the use of euphemistic strategies by IA speakers. The results related to each variable are presented below.

The formality variable. The results show that most of the Iraqi students use *overstatement* to euphemize the death topic which is ranked first in formal settings with a frequency of (182) tokens and a percentage of (37.91%). Table 4 below presents the results.

The *deletion* strategy is ranked second with a frequency of (52) tokens and a percentage of (10.83%). The *part-for-whole* strategy is ranked third with a frequency of (48) tokens and a percentage

of (10%). On the other hand, the *metaphor* strategy and *synonym* strategy were not used by any participant in formal situations. In the case of informal situations, most of the Iraqi students also used the *overstatement* strategy to euphemize death topics which is ranked first with a frequency of (57) tokens and a percentage of (11.87%). The *deletion* strategy is ranked second with a frequency of (53) tokens and a percentage of (11.0%). The *synonym* strategy is ranked third with a frequency of (36) tokens and a percentage of (7.5%) although it was not used by any participant in formal situations. On the other hand, the three strategies which are ranked last are the *general-for-Specific* strategy which ranked last with a frequency of (3) tokens and a percentage of (0.62%), the *compounding* strategy with a frequency of (4) tokens and a percentage of (0.83%), and the *metaphor* strategy with a frequency of (4) tokens and a percentage of (0.83%).

As for the mental illness topic, the results show that most of the Iraqi students use the *fuzzy words* strategy to euphemize mental illness which is ranked first in formal situations with a frequency of (64) tokens and a percentage of (13.33%). Table 5 below shows these results.

Table 5 shows that the *deletion* strategy ranked second with a frequency of (47) tokens and a percentage of (9.79%) and the *general-for-specific* strategy third with a frequency of (38) tokens and a percentage of (7.91%). On the other hand, the *understatement* strategy was not used by any participant in formal situations. In informal contexts, most Iraqi students used the *general-for-specific* strategy to euphemize mental illness topics which ranked first with a frequency of (82) tokens and a percentage of (17.08%). The *fuzzy words* strategy ranked second with a frequency of (58) tokens and a percentage of (12.08%). The *implication* strategy ranked third with a frequency of (35) tokens and a percentage of (7.29%). On the other hand, the *overstatement* strategy ranked last with a frequency of (1) token and a percentage of (0.20%).

As for the topic of obesity, the analysis revealed that most Iraqi students use the *implication* strategy to euphemize obesity topics which ranked first in formal situations with a frequency of (76) tokens and a percentage of (15.83%). Table 6 below presents the results.

Table 6 shows that the *overstatement* strategy ranked second with a frequency of (58) tokens and a percentage of (12.08%). The *compounding* strategy ranked third with a frequency of (24) tokens and a percentage of (5%). On the other hand, the *metaphor* strategy and *overstatement* strategy were not used by any participant in formal situations. In informal contexts, most Iraqi students used the *implication* strategy to euphemize obesity topics which ranked first in formal situations with a frequency of

Table 3 Frequencies and percentages of the euphemistic strategies used by iraqi males and females in referring to obesity.

Strategies	Frequencies	Percentages
Implication	176	18.33%
Overstatement	88	9.16%
Particularization	73	7.60%
Compounding	51	5.31%
Reversal	26	2.70%
Deletion	20	2.08%
Understatement	17	1.77%
Metaphor	9	0.93%
Taboo	82	8.54%
no response	418	43.58%
Total	960	100%

Table 4 Frequencies and percentages of the euphemistic strategies used by iraqi students in referring to death in different social contexts: formal-informal.

Strategies	Formal		Informal	
	Frequencies	Percentages	Frequencies	Percentages
Overstatement	182	37.91%	57	11.87%
Part-for-Whole	48	10%	23	4.79%
Deletion	52	10.83%	53	11.0%
Borrowing	16	3.33%	30	6.25%
Compounding	8	1.66%	4	0.83%
General-for- Specific	4	0.83%	3	0.62%
Synonym	0	0.00%	36	7.5%
Metaphor	0	0.00%	4	0.83%
Taboo	19	3.95%	101	21.0%
No response	151	31.49%	169	35.41%
Total	480	100%	480	100%

Table 5 Frequencies and percentages of the euphemistic strategies used by iraqi students in referring to mental illness in different social contexts: formal-informal.

Strategies	Formal		Informal	
	Frequencies	Percentages	Frequencies	Percentages
General-for- specific	38	7.91%	82	17.08%
Fuzzy words	64	13.33%	58	12.08%
Deletion	47	9.79%	15	3.12%
Implication	28	5.83%	35	7.29%
Understatement	0	0	16	3.33%
Overstatement	6	1.25%	1	0.20%
Technical Jargon	32	6.66%	28	5.83%
Taboo	9	1.87%	63	13.12%
No response	256	53.36%	182	37.91%
Total	480	100%	480	100%

Table 6 Frequencies and percentages of the euphemistic strategies used by iraqi students in referring to obesity in different social contexts: formal-informal.

Strategies	Formal		Informal	
	Frequencies	percentages	Informal	Percentage
Implication	76	15.83%	100	20.83%
Compounding	24	5%	27	5.62%
Particularization	58	12.08%	15	3.12%
Deletion	10	2.08%	10	2.08%
Reversal	2	0.41%	24	5%
Overstatement	0	0.00%	88	18.33%
Metaphor	0	0.00%	9	1.87%
Understatement	7	1.45%	10	2.08%
Taboo	10	2.08%	72	15%
no response	293	61.07%	125	26.07%
Total	480	100%	480	100%

(100) tokens and a percentage of (20.83%). The *overstatement* strategy ranked second with a frequency of (88) tokens and a percentage of (18.33%). The *compounding* strategy ranked third with a frequency of (27) tokens and a percentage of (5.26%). On the other hand, the last two strategies which ranked last are the *metaphor* strategy with a frequency of (9) tokens and a percentage of (1.87%) and the *deletion* strategy with a frequency of (10) tokens and a percentage of (2.08%).

The gender variable. In order to answer the second part of the second research question, we conducted a Chi² test which is run to reveal if there is any significant differences in relation to gender. Table 7 below shows the results of this test.

Table 7 shows that there are statistically significant differences in the formal contexts on the topic of death where (Ch²) value reached (29.355) by a statistical significance of (0.000) in favour of the male participants. The statistically significant differences appear in the strategies such as *part-for-whole* and *borrowing* whereas there are no significant differences in the use of the *overstatement* and *deletion* strategies. The table also demonstrates that there are statistically significant differences in the informal contexts on the topic of death where (Ch²) value reached (16.057) by a statistical significance of (0.003) in favour of males and the differences appear in the *deletion* and *borrowing* strategies and that there is no significant difference in the use of the *overstatement* and *part-for-whole* strategies.

As for the topic of mental illness, the table reveals that there are statistically significant differences in the formal contexts on the topic of mental illness where (Ch²) value reached (8.079) by a

statistical significance of (0.004) in favour of the males and the differences appear in the strategies of *deletion*, *technical jargon*, *fuzzy words*, and *general-for-specific* and that there are no significant differences in the use of the *implication* strategy. Moreover, the table shows that there are statistically significant differences in the informal contexts on the topic of mental illness where (Ch²) value reached (7.473) by a statistical significance of (0.006) in favour of females and the differences appear in the strategies of *fuzzy words*, *implication*, and *general-for-specific* and that no significant difference is found in the strategies of *deletion* and *technical jargon*.

The table also demonstrates that there are statistically significant differences in the formal contexts on the topic of obesity where (Ch²) value reached (20.694) by a statistical significance of (0.001) in favour of the males and that there are significant differences in the use of the strategies of *deletion*, *implication*, and *particularization*. The table also indicates that there are no significant differences in the use of the strategies of *compounding* and *reversal*. It also shows that there are statistically significant differences in the informal contexts on the topic of obesity where (Ch²) value reached (11.147) by a statistical significance of (0.025) in favour of the females and that there is a significant difference in the use of the *compounding* strategy and no significant difference in the use of the strategies of *implication*, *particularization*, *deletion*, and *reversal*.

Discussion

The use of euphemistic strategies. The findings above showed the strategies used by IA speakers to euphemise in the topics of death, mental illness, and obesity. As Allan and Burrige, (1991) argue, the death topic is a sensitive topic for people because it is accompanied by fear: “fear of the loss of loved ones; fear of the corruption and disintegration of the body; fear of what follows the end of life; and fear of malevolent souls of the dead” (p.153). The word /ma:t/ is the direct utterance generally used in the Arabic language, and specifically in IA to inform someone about another’s death. When we hear this direct expression, fearful images of the grave, isolation, and darkness come to one’s mind. Since this word can invoke strong feelings of sadness and fear in both the hearer and the speaker, the utterance is euphemized in different ways, and indeed Iraqi participants use a range of euphemistic strategies to indirectly refer to the topic of death. As is shown in Table 1, the Iraqi participants were generally indirect when talking about someone’s death, using the *overstatement* strategy in most cases. The expressions used most often were /ʕatʔa:k ʕumruh/ “gave you his age”, /ʔilbagijjah fi haja:tak/ “the rest of life for you” and /ʔintaqala ʔila rahmat ʔalla:h fula:n/ “he goes to God’s mercy.” In English and Arabic, Galal (2014) found that using a euphemism for the death

Table 7 Gender differences in strategies used in formal and informal contexts.

Topic	Type	Strategy	Frequency		Ch ²	Sig	
			Male	Female			
Death	Formal	Overstatement	98	84	1.173	0.279	
		Part-for-Whole	18	30	7.009	0.008	
		Deletion	24	28	1.733	0.188	
		Borrowing	14	2	7.994	0.005	
		Total	154	144	29.355	0.000	
	Informal	Overstatement	33	24	0.547	0.459	
		Part-for-Whole	14	9	0.523	0.470	
		Deletion	20	33	7.809	0.005	
		Borrowing	22	8	5.489	0.019	
		Total	89	74	16.057	0.003	
Mental Illness	Formal	General-for-Specific	25	13	24.804	0.000	
		Fuzzy Words	34	30	25.648	0.000	
		Deletion	22	25	4.915	0.027	
		Implication	7	21	2.011	0.156	
		Technical Jargon	22	10	22.812	0.000	
		Total	110	99	8.079	0.004	
		Informal	General-for-Specific	21	61	27.021	0.000
	Fuzzy Words		26	32	5.294	0.021	
	Deletion		6	9	0.137	0.711	
	Implication		22	13	17.668	0.000	
	Technical Jargon		8	20	0.900	0.343	
	Total		83	135	7.473	0.006	
	Obesity		Formal	Implication	27	49	19.74
		Compounding		14	10	1.351	0.245
Particularization		43		15	37.799	0.000	
Deletion		8		2	4.558	0.033	
Reversal		0		2	1.884	0.170	
Total		92		78	20.694	0.001	
Informal		Implication		48	52	0.932	0.334
		Compounding	7	20	7.22	0.007	
		Particularization	7	8	0.013	0.911	
		Deletion	4	6	0.285	0.594	
		Reversal	8	16	2.722	0.099	
		Total	74	102	11.147	0.025	

topic is nearly the same as speakers of these two languages consider death as a better place and life due to religious considerations. The above-mentioned consolation phrases are the most common utterances used by the Iraqi participants. The reason that the participants used these expressions may be related to the fact that these terms were passed down from older generations with their literal meanings being ignored. Using these utterances may reveal that people want to disconnect themselves from the reality of death. Furthermore, the participants used other utterances such as /ʕaḏʕḏʕama ʔalla:hu ʔadzrakum/, /ʔinna: lilla:h waʔinna: ʔilajhi: ra:dʒiʕu:n/, /ʔalaʕma:r bi:d ʔalla:h/, /ʔintaqala ʔila raḥmat ʔalla:h/, and /ʔalmawt haq/. These expressions clearly include phrases containing “Allah Almighty”. This is because most Muslims believe that only Allah decides when a person dies. Moreover, they also believe that all humans were created by Allah, and all humans will return to Him.

These findings are similar to those found in previous studies (e.g., Al-Azzeh, 2010). Al-Azzeh (2010) found that these expressions are the most prominent ones in Jordanian Arabic. However, the findings differ from those of Elyyan (1994), Al-Shamali, (1997), and Rabab’ah and Al-Qarni, (2012) who found that the *synonym* strategy was the most dominant strategy in Jordanian Arabic and from Enab (2020) who found that in Egyptian and Saudi Arabic, the *part-for-whole* strategy was the most often adopted strategy. The least-used strategies by the Iraqi students are the *flippancies* and *general-for-specific*

strategies. This appears in responses such as /qratʕ ʔilḥabil/ “bite a rope” which has a similar meaning to “kick the bucket” phrase in English. This strategy indicates that some people prefer to use less serious expressions as an attempt to change the atmosphere of fear permeated by the topic of death. The two expressions have the same implications; however, the literal scenario in “kick the bucket” is about a person who is standing on a bucket with a rope around their neck waiting to be hanged. For that to happen, someone must come along and kick the bucket from underneath them. Likewise, the expression /qratʕ ʔilḥabil/ “bite a rope” shows the scenario of a person about to be hanged by a rope and the process of biting it refers to death.

As for the mental illness topic, the findings above show that the Iraqi participants chose the *fuzzy words* strategy where the euphemism does not really give an accurate description of the taboo subject and that this appears in responses such as /mu: tʕabi:ʕi:/ “not normal” and /ʕinduh muʕkilih/ “he has a problem”. This indicates that the Iraqi participants attempt to avoid dealing with mental illnesses from a medical perspective; rather they are more concerned with describing the behaviour of people with mental illness inaccurately so as to avoid discussing embarrassing details. As Allan and Burridge, (1991) noted, mental illnesses are a deficiency, a sort of weakness of character in the person, i.e., a “moral fiasco”, and it is not acceptable for people to be mentally ill.

Euphemisms or alternative words are frequently employed “because many people ... [believe] that naming the disease would cause it to strike” (Allan and Burrige, 1991, p. 174). Moreover, euphemisms might be utilized in order to respect the dignity of individuals who suffer from an illness such as using “Down’s syndrome” for “Mongol” (Domínguez, 2005). Indeed, mental and intellectual disabilities are subjects that are too taboo to mention directly. These findings are not consistent with Enab (2020) who reported that Egyptians used the *understatement* strategy in the presence of FTAs and the *technical jargon* strategy when there were no FTAs to euphemize the topic of mental illness. Moreover, Al-Azzam et al., (2017) presented some expressions that Saudis use to avoid harming the emotions of the person’s family by saying /bas^ʕi:t^ʕ/ “simple,” or /ʕagla:tuh suwajjah/ “narrow-minded.” All in all, people use these terms to reflect their positive attitudes towards people with mental illness because they believe that such people are a gift from Allah, and that this disease is the result of a birth defect.

As for the obesity topic, the analysis shows that the Iraqi students used the *implication* strategy to euphemize obesity; that is, they used expressions such as /ʔilʕab ri:ja:d^ʕah/ “play sport,” /sawwij ri:dʒi:m/ “follow a diet” and /waznak za:ʒid suwajjah/ “your weight increased a little bit.” Moreover, the strategy of *overstatement* is greatly used in responses such as /malja:n/ “choppy,” /matru:s/ “filled,” /s^ʕa:ʒir dabil/ “became double” to avoid hurting feelings by using expressions such as “fat.” Unlike the other euphemized topics, obesity is a particular characteristic of physical appearance (Holder, 2008). Indeed, the word “fat” is more closely associated with words that have “negative connotations” (Chou et al., 2014). These include derogatory and misogynist terms. Furthermore, the word “fat” is more commonly found in colloquial conversations than the more medically sounding keywords “obesity” and “overweight” (ibid). As a result, people are sensitive about the subject of obesity, and it is considered rude to talk about it directly for fear of hurting the hearer’s feelings. The results concur those of Al-Azzam et al., (2017) who showed instances of how politeness is used in the Saudi Arabian society by using expressions that are similar to Iraqi expressions. These expressions show respect towards human dignity which is emphasized by Edwards and Guth (2010), who point out that “honor, dignity, and self-respect” (p.33) are considered as holy ideas among Arabs since pre-Islamic times, and that they regard them as taboo topics that should not be violated. Almoayidi, (2018) asserted that taking the emotions of others into account is a crucial element when interaction or communication takes place. This indicates that obesity is a taboo topic in Arabic societies. These euphemistic expressions may indicate the negative face which gives one the freedom to express his/her opinions freely and the positive face which refers to one’s self-esteem.

Effects of gender and degree of formality. The second research question asked about the effects of gender and degree of formality on the use of euphemistic strategies by IA speakers. In the topic of death, the results show that there is no effect which occurs between formal and informal situations on the strategies used by the participants. For example, the participants use expressions of condolences to inform others about the death of someone in informal and formal situations which reflect the religious and cultural aspects shared among the Iraqi people, regardless of the social context. The degree of formality has long been of interest to researchers, with periodic discussions of the relationship between formality and different social

contexts (Li et al., 2016). As a matter of fact, changing from one utterance to another depends on the situations in which one is speaking. These results agree with the findings of Rabab’ah and Al-Qarni, (2012) and Obaid and Seger, (2020) who found no significant effect of formality on the strategies used in the topic of death. Another interesting finding concerning death was that Iraqi speakers greatly use the utterances /ma:t/ and /tawafa:/ in informal situations. This finding is not consistent with Sa’d’s (2017) that the Arab community in Iran used the utterance /ma:t/ in informal situations and /tawafa:/ in formal contexts. In the topic of mental illness, the findings show that the participants clearly shift from one strategy to another. In formal settings, the analysis above shows that the *fuzzy words* strategy is greatly used, whereas the *general-for-specific* strategy is greatly used in informal situations. This means that the topic of mental illness is euphemized in each situation and considered to be a sensitive topic to talk about directly in the presence of strangers and friends. Moreover, most expressions have a positive meaning in the two situations with the lesser use of negative ones. These expressions describe this illness as a happiness disease. In other words, the Iraqi participants use these expressions because they believe that people who suffer from this disease are like angels and come only to people who are loved by Allah. This indicates that some people show their love and sympathy and consider them innocent individuals. In the topic of obesity, the results above show that the participants use the *implication* strategy in both formal and informal situations. Moreover, the participants use more strategies in informal than in formal settings. For instance, both the *overstatement* and *metaphor* strategies are utilized in informal settings whereas they are never used in formal contexts. Most of the expressions of obesity used by Iraqi participants refer to advisement and concern and are used in formal situations. In medical literature, Taylor and Ogden, (2009, p. 260) found that obese patients find euphemism more annoying and the term ‘obese’ “made patients feel more anxious and upset and made them believe that the problem had more serious consequences.” In language, mainly in the form of synonymic sets, the language user should be allowed to choose between one or the other according to the context of use and intended function of the word (Danglli, 2016).

As for the effect of gender on the use of euphemistic strategies, the findings show that gender affected the use of euphemistic strategies. The female participants used more techniques, as shown in the results above. According to Al-Shamali (1997), this characteristic influences the preference for particular euphemism tactics over others. Likewise, other experts posit that women and men acquire different speech habits: women, for example, speak in a more polite way (Holmes, 1995). These results are not in line with the results of some previous research that considered gender as an ineffective component in speech events. Crawford and Chaffin, (1987) claimed that while topic influences speech features, there are no variations in style or production between men and women. In normal communication, gender still influences the terminology or euphemisms used. The results also reveal that the female respondents used more euphemisms than their male counterparts did. This finding supports the notion that women’s language is more courteous (Lakoff, 1973) and are consistent with Rabab’ah and Al-Qarni (2012) and Karimnia and Khodashenas (2016). This can be attributed to the fact that women are anticipated to show greater levels of most emotional expressions (Chaplin and Aldao, 2013), emotions such as “happiness, embarrassment, surprise, sadness, fear, shame, and guilt” (Brody and Hall, 2008, p. 396). Moreover, this indicates that women consider these topics to be sensitive to talk about

directly to people who are close to them such as relatives and close friends.

Conclusion

This study has explored the euphemistic strategies used by IA speakers to refer to topics of death, mental illness, and obesity. As for the death topic, many cultures perceive death as an unpleasant event for speakers to directly deliver its news. The word 'death' invokes a horrible feeling in nearly all humans no matter what their culture is; they cannot imagine life without their loved ones. Empathy in the Iraqi society is a prominent feature, especially in difficult times such as the death of a loved one. Therefore, Iraqis have a habit of using euphemistic utterances to offer sympathy and lessen the impact of the shock of the news. Offering sympathy is not only a characteristic of the Iraqi society, but also people in all cultures as they use it as a means of expressing their sorrow. As for mental illness and obesity, the present study showed that to euphemize the topics of mental illness and obesity in IA, the participants utilized several strategies to replace the undesirable terms. According to Huang, (2005), one of the primary goals of euphemisms is to show courtesy. Thus, when speaking about such topics, individuals tend to avoid insensitivity or harshness, instead utilizing euphemisms to save the face of others. In the light of these findings, it is highly recommended that future studies compare or contrast the euphemistic strategies used in different cultures which may help to understand various cultures in cross-cultural communications. Further research is recommended to compare euphemisms used between two different languages according to older age groups and younger age groups. It would be very useful to conduct research in order to compare negative and positive euphemisms as they are used within certain cultures.

Data availability

All data analysed are fully included in the paper.

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

This research was carried out following the provisions which underline the basic principles of professionalism and ethics of research, approved by our institutions. The study was conducted in accordance with the principles of reliability, integrity, respect, and accountability and with the provisions of point 23, which define the cases in which the investigator is required to submit to the evaluation committee his/her research plan for the validation of compliance with the professionalism and ethics of the research.

Informed consent

Informed consent was gathered from all participating students. Confidentiality was maintained by not requesting names or any other information that would identify the students involved. The subjects were informed of their right to withdraw from the investigation at any time.

Additional information

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