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Çağdaş Türk Lehçeleri ve Edebiyatları Bölümü

MAKALE

Analysing Turkish Medical Euphemisms as Verbal Hygiene in the First Corona Days

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ÖZET

Alanyazında örtmecenin doktorların hastalarıyla birebir etkileşimlerinde arzu edilmeyen konuları iletmede güvenli bir yol olarak kullanıldığı görülmektedir. Ancak yazarın bildiği kadarıyla, doktorların halka seslenişlerinde kullandıkları örtmece üzerine bir araştırma bulunmamaktadır. Bu çalışma ilk Covid-19 salgını günlerinde (10 Mart-30 Nisan 2020) halka bilgi veren 34 doktorun hazırlıklı/hazırlıksız 52 röportaj ve konuşmasında kullandığı örtmece dil üzerinde odaklanmıştır. Çalışma doktorların arzu edilmeyen bir mesajı iletirken doğrudan bir ifade mi, yoksa birebir etkileşimler esnasında yapılan önceki çalışmalarda görüldüğü gibi, örtmece bir dil mi kullandığını, eğer kullanıyorsa, alttülerini çözümlmeyi hedeflemiştir. Sonuçlar örtmecenin çeşitli türlerle karşımıza çıktığını ve hem doktorların hem de halkın olumlu/olumsuz yüzünü korumak amacıyla pandeminin ilk günlerinde kullanıldığını ortaya koymaktadır.

ANAHTAR SÖZCÜKLER

Yüz tehdidi, örtmece, söylem çözümlemesi, tıbbi söylem, örtmecenin dilsel aracı.

ABSTRACT

Literature indicates that euphemism is used by doctors as a safe way to communicate unpleasant issues in one-to-one interaction with their patients. But, to the best knowledge

of the author, no research was made on euphemism used by doctors during their public address. This research focuses on an analysis of euphemistic devices used in prepared/unprepared speeches by 34 Turkish doctors giving information to the public out of 52 interviews/talks during the first Covid-19 pandemic days (between 10 March and 30 April 2020). The research aims at analysing whether doctors would directly express an undesirable message, or whether they would feel obliged to attenuate the expressions found in former research in one-to-one interactions, and if euphemic devices are at stake, at exploring subtypes of euphemism. The results reveal that euphemism is manifested in several types, and serves to protect the positive/ negative face of doctors, as well as those of general public in the first pandemic days.

KEY WORDS

face threat, euphemism, discourse analysis, medical discourse, euphemistic device.

1. Introduction

How people perceive and interpret a clearly reported phenomenon depends on the choice of words. In life, there are sensitive facts/ issues, which people need to discuss without directly mentioning them. Euphemism, a word coined from the Greek, combining the words “proper, straight, normal” plus “speaking” (Allan et al. 2006), is one of the linguistic devices used to resolve the dilemma of the need to express what is socially difficult in clear and direct terms (Alkire 2002).

Euphemisms at lexical and discursive levels can be stated to have the following functions: avoidance of discrimination to disadvantaged groups, concern for people’s sensitivity, tactful criticism, and mitigation – or even concealment- of unsettling topics (Crespo-Fernández 2014), aimed at either attenuating, or reinforcing a certain forbidden concept/reality (Casas Gómez 2009), and maintaining politeness not to offend certain parties (Winita et al. 2019).

As proposed by Burrige (2012: 67-71), at least six different but frequently overlapping functions of euphemism are identified (to shield and avoid offense, to disguise a topic and deceive, to talk up and inflate, to mask, to show solidarity, and finally, to amuse and entertain). Pragmatically, it plays a crucial role in “politeness and face management issues” (Crespo-Fernández 2005: 85), “gloss-over, avoidance of taboos and disguise” (Pan 2013) or “masking, preventive, manipulative and grinding” (Baranova 2018: 22).

So far, some questionnaire and interview studies have been made on the euphemistic use of medical discourse and the functions related concerning terminal diseases and giving bad news. The corpus of such studies was in general based on one-to-one interaction between doctors and patients or its metadiscourse. However, to the best knowledge of the author, no research has analysed the euphemistic use of

medical discourse in Turkey, and no international study focused on doctors' public speeches/talks. This research explores whether doctors' medical euphemistic language use would change when they address general public on TV channels or social media, in which case: i. there would be no patient physically present while they were breaking the news, ii. they became public figures, using various creative strategies to reduce their responsibility for the events under discussion, in the way that Kampf (2009) argued for politicians.

In literature, doctors were mainly found to hold the following five principles in their communication with seriously unwell patients: "respect for the truth, patients' rights, doctors' duty to inform, the preservation of hope, and individual contract between patient and doctor" (Naoko 1993: 253). Research indicates that "if bad news is communicated badly it can cause confusion, long lasting distress, and resentment; if done well, it can assist understanding, acceptance, and adjustment" (Fallowfield et al. 2004: 317).

The motives for using euphemisms by doctors are the following: to conceal the truth, as exploring it would have undesirable psychological consequences on the user; to be polite in order to minimize the effect of explicit and sensitive words on the hearer; to gradually move the health care user towards accepting the harsh reality; to avoid using a potentially taboo words on body organs and secretions, and to sugar-coat the hard truth, so as not to cause offence or hurting feelings (Rababah 2014).

2.Theoretical Frame

Interpersonal communication within the framework of social phenomena is associated with a minimum of two speakers in close physical proximity, exchanging "idiosyncratic, personal and psychological information", but it can also arise in different settings, including through various mediating technologies (Knapp et al. 1994), which, undermines the treatment of personal relationships as communication contexts (Haugh et al. 2013), as in our case.

Medical discourse, in our case, COVID-19 discourse in first six weeks, is sensitive in that it aims to increase awareness about a novel emerging virus, and it affects the actions/measures people will take. In this situation, the approach taken allows me to explore the way doctors try at all costs to win in favour of their medical and general audience through euphemistic language. Their aim here is obviously not to gain votes, as in the political discourse, but to ensure that people are not misled or frightened by the newly gained data. Politeness and face (Brown et al. 1987) provide a convenient frame here. Adopted from Goffman (1967), face is a universal object,

though culturally shaped. Some acts are intrinsically face threatening, and Face Threatening Acts (FTA) are avoided by various linguistic devices. Though politeness as a notion put forth by Brown and Levinson (1987) has some problematic aspects, as summarized by Fraser (1990: 23-25), it provides valuable tools for the analysis, namely concepts of Positive Face and Negative Face. Brown and Levinson (1987: 66) identify the following speech acts as threats to the Hearer's Positive Face (PF): criticism, contempt, ridicule, insult, contradiction, challenges and disagreements, while as threats to the Hearer's Negative Face (NF): orders, requests, suggestions, threats, offers, and promises. The hearer, in the corpus, means the other interlocutors in the TV studio, and more broadly, the general public watching live or recorded as you tube videos. Bull (2008) emphasized that negative face needs are just as important, because people (doctors, in our case) would seek to avoid responses which restrain their future freedom of action, that is why they aim to avoid precise answers, to escape the need to refute them later if provided with contradictory scientific data. Being aware of the problematic aspects of Brown and Levinson's theory, I subscribe to Watts' (2003) view that linguistic structures do not, in themselves, denote politeness, instead, they lend themselves to individual interpretation as polite in instances of ongoing verbal interaction. It follows that no linguistic device is inherently polite or impolite; and used for euphemistic purposes.

3. Corpus and Methodology

As contextual issues play a crucial role in euphemism, this study is based on words as well as coherent and contextualized discourses excerpted from a sample of real language use. The corpus consists of videos retrieved from the internet over a period between 10 March and 30 April. 10 March saw the official announcement of the first case in Turkey by the Ministry of Health. Ever since the outbreak of the pandemic, the Turkish audience, like the world audience were suddenly regularly confronted on TV channels and via podcasts with doctors and health specialists, who became public figures like politicians. Against this background, I randomly chose 52 different interviews /talk available online, by using a systematic key word sampling on the internet. Talks/interviews containing "corona", "pandemic", "virus", "vaccination", and specific dates, were considered. Of these, 34 talks by different doctors (29 male, 5 female) containing euphemistic expressions were included in the sample. The doctors included were either Turkish Scientific Committee members or senior scholars from related disciplines, mostly Professors/ Associate Professors. Their names are given as initials only.

The talks were broadcast over 23 youtube channels, namely: Eksensiz TV, CNN Turk, NTV, DW Türkiye, Pena, TGRT, Ulusal Kanal, Ahval, Kanal D, Bizim TV, Halk TV, Medyascope, TV100, Sözcü, MerkezSiyaset, KRTkültür Tv, TELE1, ATV, 196Sekiz, Fox, bidebunuizle, Demirören, and the personal youtube channels of three doctors (their initials being YD, MÇ and OT). As the talks were randomly chosen, a wide range of views is possible. On the other hand, some doctors and you tube channels appeared in more than one item. As those people and channels might have idiolect- and ideology-related discourse, which might affect frequencies of the use of some subgroups analysed, a mainly qualitative approach was adopted, though a quantitative analysis is also provided in Figure 1 to allow a better understanding about the distribution of the euphemistic devices involved. Adopting the bottom-up approach of Crespo-Fernández (2014), purposive sampling was used in which certain linguistic data were selected at lexical/discursive level, then interpretations were made to reach generalizations, and next, the meaning and function of the euphemistic use were analysed.

The literature abounds in well-established classifications of euphemism (among the others, Quirk et al. 1972, Allan et al. 1991, Rawson 1995, Hai-long 2008, Fraser 2010). The subcategories of euphemism formation were investigated, using the terms proposed by Neaman et al. (1990), Allan et al. (1991), Warren (1992), Rawson (1995), Crespo-Fernández (2014), and Jamet (2018). Accordingly, the following subcategories of lexical substitution were determined for the analysis: underspecification, periphrasis, litotes, technical jargon, and neologism. Discursive strategies were categorised as follows (Crespo-Fernández 2005, 2014): mitigating apology expressions, hedging modal verbs, downtoning adverbs and phrases, conditional sentences, and passive construction.

4. Findings and Discussion

As Crespo-Fernández (2014) states, euphemism is a twofold phenomenon. It was not only examined as a lexical process by which distasteful words are replaced, but also as a set of discursive tactics acting on verbal behaviour not in conformity with the politeness expectations and conventions. The distribution of linguistic devices employed for euphemism formation is indicated below. Some euphemistic items occupy more than one category.

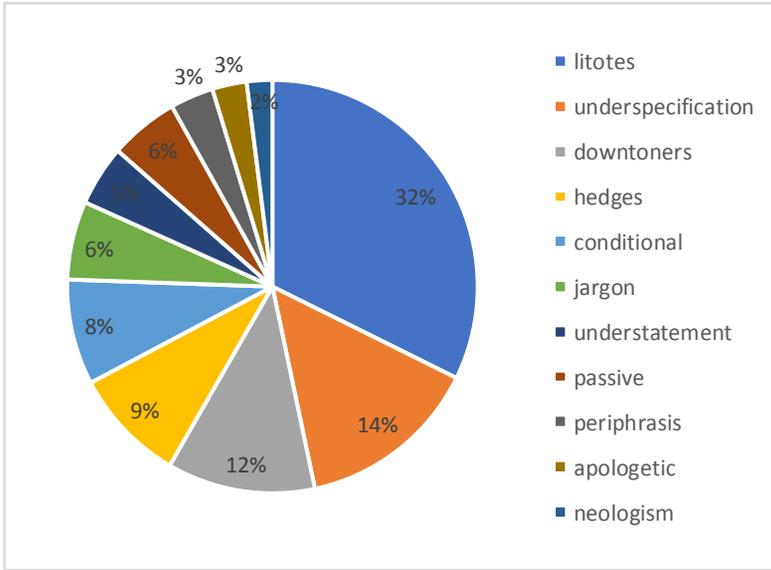


Figure 1. Linguistic devices of euphemism in the corpus

Out of the 146 euphemistic items encountered in 52 talks/interviews, the first noticeable quality is that most euphemistic items are identified at lexical level. Of 92 occurrences, litotes (47) is the most frequent, followed by underspecification (21), technical jargon (9), understatement (7), periphrasis (5), neologism (3). At the sentence level, there are 54 occurrences: downtoners (17), followed by hedges (13), conditionals (12), passive voice (8) and apologetic expressions (4).

At this point, I have to point out that the explanations in parantheses in exemplary quotations are put due to the fact the original sentence implies it, but does not contain the very words; that is, these are my additions. Besides, the order in paranthesis next to the original quotations for examples is as follows: date of delivery, no. of example in the relevant interview/talk, the initials of the doctor. All translations of the doctor quotations from Turkish into English in this study are mine.

5. Euphemism at Lexical Level

The most frequent type encountered in the corpus as lexical euphemism is litotes. Litotes means replacing the undesirable word with the negative expression of its opposite (Rawson 1995), keeping verbal behaviour “within the limits of what is conventionally considered as polite behaviour” (Crespo-Fernandez 2014: 16). Let us

see in the following Example how a lexical euphemistic substitution is used to state that the number of young people who catch Covid-19 is not significantly meaningful:

(1)... Bu çok yüksek bir oran değil. (24 March, 7a, SŞY)

(This is not a very high rate.)

Here the doctor could have said that the rate, although high, was not as high as for the elderly. However, the word high still has a strong connotation; so, this is a politically correct expression. This acts as a consolation to parents, aimed at reducing concern over their children's health. She also felt the need to warn of the imminent danger to children. This complies with Fraser (1990) who argues that the speaker's appreciation of a responsibility toward the hearer - in our case the general audience-in the interaction determines the euphemistic use.

It is interesting to find that even ungradable adjectives are graded to produce this effect. Considered as grammatically inappropriate in many other contexts, the doctor has good reason for choosing this strategy it in the following:

(2) Testi negatif çıkanları da Covid gibi kabul etmek çok yanlış olmaz.

(It would not be very wrong to regard those whose test results are negative, as Covid patients.)

(3) Sonuçların çok da iç açıcı olmadığını siz de oradan görebilirsiniz. (7 April, 31g, KP).

(You also may see (in the report) that the results are not very desirable.)

The sentence in Example (2) was uttered by a doctor upon a question as to to what extent the tests are sensitive, and how to evaluate the test results. The sentence in Example (3) implies that the results of the Covid-19 report on refugees are not at all desirable, rather than desirable or very desirable. Both doctors must know that the result is either desirable or not. The point in both cases is that doctors tend to avoid using the words "wrong and "undesirable", respectively, as these might pose a threat to their public image, which has to do with emotional and social sense of self, following Brown and Levinson (1987). However, they also feel the need to avoid expressing optimistic views.

(4) Herkes bu konuya çok iyi uymadı. (24 April, no.39, CU)

(Everybody did not obey this very well.)

Here, the verb *uy-* (obey) does not comply with the gradable adverb “well”; one either obeys or disobeys a rule. It does not matter if the violated rule is trivial. Actually, here the doctor avoids criticizing the general public over the rules dictated by the pandemic, like social distancing, and wearing a mask, because he deems it inappropriate to indiscriminately blame a mass of people. Therefore, he knowingly used the litotes “everybody did not obey this issue well” for negative face reasons, to mitigate the effect to give the impression that they obeyed to some extent, if not all. In the following Example, the main concern is to prevent panic while making a prediction about the course of the pandemic. Rather than saying epidemics will increase in severity and number, the doctor preferred to express his projection in the following way:

(5) Daha az salgın olmaz. (13 April, no.25d, DU)

(It seems that there will not be less epidemics) (in severity and number.)

Litotes was sometimes encountered by negating the adverb, reinforced by hedging modal “be unable to” in the following sentence. Here, the point is to avoid a threat to one’s public image. Medicine is full of issues yet to be explored, the novel corona virus being one, but a doctor is more comfortable saying “we are unable to know much”, than saying “we know little”

(6) Ne yapacağını çok bilemiyoruz. (2 Nisan, 15b)

(We are unable to know much about what it (virus) would do.)

Underspecification, found relatively frequently in the study, is employed by use of generic instead of specific terms. Some words (it, problem, situation, and thing) help cast ideas in the widest possible terms, and represent ideal cover-up words, such as thing for depression (Rawson 1995). In general, it was used to avoid unpleasant truths such as delicate issues or taboos. This truth is related to disease, uncontrolled events and serious results in the following examples, and used for the audience’s negative face needs:

(7) Bu iş oldu. (2 April, no.18d, UT)

(This thing happened.)

(8) 2 saatlik olay bütün modellerinizi altüst eder. (13April, no.25c, DU)

(An incident lasting 2 hours would make all your models upside down.)

(9) Her işi ben yaparım, benim ekibim var dersenez, hakikaten ortaya böyle

şaşırtıcı bir tablo ortaya konabilir. (2 April, 15a, SA)

(If you say that I can do all the tasks, I have a team; indeed, it may result in a surprising picture like this.)

Understatement, another euphemistic device encountered in the corpus, can be comprehensively defined as a statement that decreases the strength, importance, seriousness of a concept/ thing, either to protect the speaker or to prevent the hearer's unwelcome negative action (Mateillo 2013). As Crespo-Fernández (2014) highlights, understatement not only allows for a more favorable interpretation but also yield more positive connotations. Example (9) utilizes an adjective surprising used as an understatement. It may be used as a replacement of a wide range of qualities. There is another adjective which is used almost in any kind of appraisal, which is interesting, for politeness purposes. For example, even if we find something neutral or ordinary, we may use the word interesting, which gives room for manoeuvre through vagueness. In the following quotation, the word şaşırtıcı (surprising) is used as a substitution for something negative. The doctor here admits going through a very hard period, meaning working at hospital in the corona days, and admits that the healthcare personnel are working self-sacrificingly, but does not utter the word zor (hard), as its effect would not fit a resilient doctor image.

(10) Çok ilginç bir dönem yaşıyoruz. (9 April, no.22, TD)

(We are undergoing a very interesting period.)

Note the following understatement, in which a doctor even may even prefer to avoid the word disease, referring to Covid-19, regardless of the stage it is in.

(11) İnsanlar olumsuz etkileniyor. (17 April, no.31f, KP)

(The people are being negatively affected.)

Here, the phrase olumsuz etkileniyor (being negatively affected) has a weaker connotation in the audience's mind, when compared to catching the disease itself. Disease, in particular, Covid-19, is such a sensitive issue that it is regarded as an unwanted guest. Therefore, the doctor, a specialist in epidemiology, in the following quotation, prefers to use the expression drop by when referring to a disease, understanding the patient's intuition that the stay should be short as possible for this symbolic guest. Actually, she certainly knows that once one is infected with this disease, the cure takes time.

(12) Hiç kendine uğramayacağını zannediyor insan en başta hastalığın. (8 April, no. 20, FÖ)

(At first, one supposes that the illness would not drop by them.)

Another euphemistic example is the use of technical jargon. This is considered to be one of doctors' coping strategies which fall under medicalizing to dehumanize or objectify the patient, as specified by Schulman-Green (2013: 257).

(13) 640000 yatış alan hasta (24 March, no.6, OB)

(64000 hospitalized patients)

(14) izole edilen temaslı... (29 April, no.50, TÖ)

(contacted person who isolated himself/herself)

Here the term hospitalized person (yatış alan hasta) in Example (13) is a euphemistic way of describing seriously ill patients being treated in hospital, and the term temaslı (contacted person) in Example (14) refers to one infected with the virus and undergoing a quarantine period. The technical jargon as seen below mitigates the situation.

(15) konfirme ölüm (22 April, no.37, Cİ)

(confirmed death)

(16) Sürveyans meselesi ciddiye çok alınmadı. (14 April, 27e, SS)

(The issue of surveillance was not taken very seriously.)

Unlike the technical jargon in Examples (13) and (14); Examples (15) and (16) are likely to be seen as more complicated to members of the public without foreign language knowledge because they cannot liken them to anything familiar. Such medical terms of Latin origin are commonly used by doctors in communication with general public in Turkey, and also used by patients, in Kiş (2014). Although the point of departure for using Latin terms rather than their Turkish counterparts, if any, may not be directly euphemistic, it may be claimed to produce a mitigating effect on the public in time, as well as a contribution to the doctor's positive face, since it is considered as an indicator of a doctor's profound knowledge. However, the medical discourse examined occasionally utilized both oversimplification as well as jargon for euphemistic purposes, as the case above, which echoed former literature, though not many in number.

(17) Ya değilsek ve bir de hastalığı orda alırsak. (8 April, 20c, FÖ)

(what if we are not ill, if we get the illness there.)

The verb in italics above, to get (al-) is an oversimplified way of expressing catch to collocate with illness in this context, but the doctor declined to use the common collocation for euphemistic reasons.

Periphrastic label, being another device, is used to disguise unpleasant realities by roundabout expressions (Crespo-Fernández 2014). To give an example, though in the first days of Corona, the old people were referred to as yaşlı (the elderly) by doctors, this was increasingly found disparaging, and was replaced by (18) ileri yaştakiler (aged people) (17 April, no.30, AÇ), being a periphrasis as a subgroup of circumlocution. Then in a few days, this verbiage was similarly found derogatory, and the government officials started to use 65 yaş üstü (people above 65), which was later welcomed by the whole society. This also illustrates the concept of a euphemistic treadmill, coined by Pinker (2002). In the same vein, it is known that euphemistic references to people are replaced periodically by further cultivated euphemisms, when found derogatory (Valentine 1998).

Neologism, being the last euphemistic lexical device to be mentioned here, is generally defined as a new lexeme/phrase entering a given language, or a new meaning taken by an existing lexeme/phrase in a given language (Jamet 2018). In the corpus, only three neologisms were identified.

(19) yeni normal (new normal) (24 April, no.40, AA). One of the neologisms encountered in the corpus was new normal (yeni normal). This neologism appeared and was adopted worldwide. The normal changed, but not for the better; this was the underlying factor for such neologism. The other two neologisms found are specific to Turkish case:

(20) Çarşı izni (Market Permit) (25 April, 45b, MC). It refers to the permit granted to people over 65 on specific days. The doctor claims that this serves to allow shopping but does not address health concerns.

(21) Piknik Karantinası (Picnic Quarantine) (17 April, 30c, AS)

The second neologism is piknik karantinası (picnic quarantine), by which the doctor states that this weekend quarantine is to prevent picnic at the weekends, and ironically means that it does not make much sense in terms of health concerns.

6. Euphemism at The Discursive Level

Burkhardt defines discursive euphemisms as “sentences formulated by means of words or phrases with no or relatively few negative connotations, in a way which warrants that unpleasant truths are hidden/ at least played down” (2010: 358).

In this respect, the mitigating effect on the whole sentence can be achieved through linguistic devices, one of which is hedging modality. Hedges indicate the speaker’s lack of complete commitment to absolute, categorical assertions, thus attenuating the illocutionary force of the utterance (Fraser 2009).

(22) ... önümüzde çok pozitif, optimist olabileceğimiz bir tablo yok maalesef.
(4 April, 17b, ÇK)

(I am afraid, we are not faced with a very positive picture, with which we can be optimistic.)

(23) Bazı kimseler duyarsız olabiliyor. (31 March, no.14, TÖ)

(Some people can be insensitive.)

Example (22) looks like statement of “generalized validity”, a category devised by Göksel and Kerslake (2005: 346), whereas the one in (23) is an “assumption with future time reference” (idib). The scrutiny of those sentences reveals that they actually refer to facts. In other words, instead of posing an FTA by using a declarative sentence such as some people are insensitive (in obeying the rules) the doctors use the most polite way possible as above.

(24) Bu dönüşün birdenbire olamayacağı çok açık. (19 April, 32b, MÇ)

(It is very obvious that this turn cannot be abrupt.)

In Example (24), the doctor tries to persuade the public that the current situation will not change overnight. On one hand, he wants to be positive as people are desperately waiting for the pandemic to come to an end, due to various and most importantly, health reasons. On the other hand, he also knows that it is unethical to distort the truth and say it will end soon, thus he chooses an abrupt and exaggerated phrase adding a modal verbal suffix -(y)Abil and -(y)AmA to the negative stem of a verb, creating a litotes.

Downtoning an adverb is another device used for such mitigation. The most frequent downtoner is a bit as a minimizer. It can be used with adjectives as a degree modifier as well, as in the following: Its level of precision is a bit low (kesinlik ölçüsü

biraz düşük.) (27 April, no.49). See the following, in which the doctor tried to soften the collective state of mind in the pandemic.

(25) İnsanlar biraz bunaldı. (27 April, no.48, TÖ)

(People got depressed a bit.)

(26) (Evcil hayvanların) pek yaşama şansı olmayacak. (8 April, 19b, YD)

(The chance for (pets) to survive is not much.)

In Example (26), the doctor used a very careful language, implying that most pets will die due to their abandonment on the grounds that they will infect their owners with Covid-19 (which was a misbelief, refuted by the medical authorities). The reality on survival rate of pets must be harsher than is implied, but the doctor tries to avoid damaging the face-saving needs, that is, he does not want to hurt animal lovers' feelings when they learn the threats to pets by ignorant people.

The downtoning phrase *o kadar*, rendered as that in English, is an interesting euphemistic device found in the corpus. The following quotation reveals that that much has gained an almost mysterious quality, which works very well for the intended purpose of mitigation. After all, the efficiency level compared between the two incidents is not obvious, and the efficiency achieved in the latter may mean nothing for health measures. This hedging is suitable for all circumstances, as there is no way to measure, therefore, giving the impression of sincerity, although not openness. As scientific scepticism leads one to conclude that mistakes in judgements can easily occur, such roundabout expressions facilitate the mitigation aimed. The data is consistent with Salager-Meyer's (1994: 151) argument that hedging may present the strongest claim a cautious researcher can make.

(27) Bu etkililik pandeminin kendisiyle virüsle savaşıma sırasında o kadar etkili olmadı. (14 April, no.27, MC)

(This efficiency proved to be not that efficient during the struggle against the virus.)

Conditional sentences were also seen to be used for mitigation accompanied by rhetorical use. The next example uttered by a doctor is intended to sugar-coat the physical condition of the body with a deficient immune system. She apparently seeks to avoid frightening the general public through a direct expression, and chooses to say it as follows:

(28) İmün sistemi savaşamayacak durumdaysa, ne tedavi verirsiniz verin biraz zorlu bir süreç oluyor. (8 April, no.20d, FÖ)

(If the immune system is unable to struggle (against the virus), no matter what treatment you offer, it becomes a little bit hard process.)

The euphemistic conditional sentence can also be used to soften criticism of people who do not take the situation seriously. In example (29), the doctor hides the unfavourable content in a conditional sentence with a rhetorical question. The doctor means here, there is no point for Turkey to be less cautious about virus, as the danger is all over the world.

(29) Neden virüs Almanya'da, Fransa'da, İspanya'da farklı, Türkiye'de farklı davranır, biri bana bunun açılımını söylese, ben de ikna olacağım. (25 April, no. 44b, EŞ)

(If someone could explain to me why the virus would be acting differently in Germany, France, Spain and Turkey, I would be convinced about this.)

“The conditional clauses marked with –sAydl always have counterfactual meaning” (Göksel and Kerslake 2005: 496). In the following quotation, the doctor makes a polite criticism about the competence of people assigned to the Scientific Committee, to manage the pandemic through scientific recommendations.

(30) Ehline bırakılsaydı, bu söylenirdi. (14 April, no.27c, SS)

(If it (the task) was delegated to the competent one(s), they would be warned.)

In this criticism, passive construction was used to avoid referring to self or another, because it would have been perceived as arrogant to state that “the authorized people should have chosen people like me or those I approve, because I or people like me would have warned them”. As exemplified above, syntactic structures can be used to “project an impersonal” point of view (Penelope 1981: 475). This way, speakers distance themselves from the action, and from the negative consequences (Crespo-Fernández 2014). The passive construction does not always need the verbal suffix –Il, In, an impersonal use by a lexical choice such as “one” (insan, kişi) would create the same mitigating effect. Similarly, in Example (12), the doctor politely warns everybody that they must be careful in taking measures, by using an impersonal use.

In the following quotation, the passive construction serves both positive face of the speaker, as well as the others, while making a critical remark about why cases

might have increased, without sufficient public warning. The doctor made use of negating a modal verbal suffix *-(y)Abil* in the stem of the verb (Göksel and Kerslake 2005). The doctor apparently does not feel in a position to make such a demand as a citizen and a doctor, therefore, he tries to mitigate its force through the use of downtoning adverb *belki* (perhaps) and passive construction, thus protecting his positive face, and considering the possibility of negative face wants of government healthcare personnel. To achieve this, he utilized the tactics of omitting the agent and denying responsibility, as found by Kampf (2009).

(31) *Belki bilgiler daha erken ulaştırılmadı. (14 April, 25b, DU)*

(Perhaps, the updated information could not be provided.)

Mitigating apology expressions were the least encountered devices. *Maalesef* (unfortunately) was the most common of these. Note how it mitigates the force of the sentence. Apologetic expression is coupled with a litotes to further mitigate the grave condition experienced. The word *hissiyat* is an unscientific choice, when making scientific claims. This word must therefore have been deliberately chosen to mitigate the assertion, through its role as a disclaimer.

(32) *Bu bizim daha vaka sayımızın artacağı yönündeki hissiyatımızı maalesef çok gidermiyor (19 April, 33, HK)*

(This fact does not very much help us to get rid of our feelings that the number of our cases will increase, I am afraid.)

All the discursive euphemistic devices encountered also serve to marginalize doctors' commitment, which confirms a finding identified in analyzing politicians' commitments (Ilić et al. 2014)

In addition to the aforementioned linguistic devices, euphemistic phraseological units were also identified in our Turkish corpus, which confirms the findings by Shemshurenko and Shafigullina (2015: 133). As an example, the doctor uses a Turkish idiom, *velveleye vermek*, meaning making a big deal out of something, in quotation (33).

(33) *Onun çok da içinde olmayan arkadaşım çıkıp bir şey söylediğinde ortalığı velveleye veriyor. (24 April, no. 41, SÜ)*

(One of my friends, who is not that specialized in that field make a big deal out of it, by saying something about it.)

This study suggests that doctors had a self-filtering train of thought, in which many issues were considered including, but, not necessarily limited to the following: their own medical career, their colleagues, and general public comprised of a heterogeneous group of varying ages and health conditions (with/without Covid-19 and with/out underlying illness).

As a result of a scrutiny of the findings, it is seen that doctors' use of medical euphemisms on both State and private channels and media in the Corona days, are in line with Rababah (2014). Despite no direct communication between doctors and patients or general public, and despite their status as public figures, they show a tendency to mitigate unpleasant truth about Covid-19. Mitigation is known to be restricted to speech acts whose effects are unwelcome to the hearer (Fraser 1980). Considering the dynamic and psychological nature of course of events, this definition can be extended to cover the acts whose effects are felt to unwelcome to the hearer; in view of the fact that what was initially neutral may prove to be sensitive in time. The doctors were challenged in maintaining their medical tone, given the number of questions and rhetorical questions on these, life-and-death medical issues.

The intentional vagueness and semantic indeterminacy (Fraser 2010) in the euphemistic discourse provided the doctors with mitigation and face-saving strategies. Apologetic expressions, downtoners, hedges and passive constructions all facilitated doctors' reference to controversial issues, which clearly echoes Crespo-Fernández's findings in the political context (2014: 22). Furthermore, as several lexical and discursive examples above indicate, euphemistic devices at the sentence level may appear simultaneously, none inherently excluding the others. This peaceful coexistence even further enhances the effectiveness of polite hedging and equivocation, and consequently, the degree of euphemism.

7. Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the euphemistic devices in medical discourse during the Corona pandemic. The corpus was collected from the prepared and spontaneous speeches by doctors specialized in disciplines including infectious diseases, genetics, and public health. These speeches were made to provide information to the general public, and given between 10 March, when the first case was officially reported in Turkey, and 30 April 2020. It scrutinized the uses of the following subcategories of lexical substitutions: underspecification, understatement, litotes, technical jargon, periphrasis and neologism, as well as discursive strategies: mitigating apology expressions, hedging modal verbs, downtoning adverbs and phrases, conditional

sentences, and passive construction. It is seen that the language-specific capacities were maximized to ensure euphemistic messages, as in the examples of litotes. The aim was not to elaborate the language, but to gain sufficient room for maneuver, while addressing face-maintaining concerns.

The lexical findings obtained from this study may vary across languages and cultures, because as Allan (2007) highlighted, the nature of connotations varies across contexts and speech communities, independently of sense, denotation and reference. However, there are three other culture-and language-independent points. First, euphemism serves to mitigate the unpleasant effects of unpleasant truths. The results reveal that euphemism plays an important role in protecting the positive face of doctors who used euphemism in the early days of Corona. Second, it was also used for the negative face needs of the healthcare personnel and the general public. Finally, the lack of direct communication between doctors and patients/general public, while doctors were being interviewed/talking in our case created no discrepancy with former findings about one-to-one interaction between or metadiscourse on doctors and patients: regardless of medium, there is a general tendency to mitigate unpleasant truth or breaking bad news about a highly infectious and terminal disease, Covid-19.

The risk perceived by the lay people and doctors were therefore significantly different at this time. In addition, especially in the first two weeks, when any finding proved to be novel for both medics and lay people, they tended to use highly euphemistic expressions to avoid scientific as well as psychological errors. In the following days, a politically correct discourse started to take root, as they were cognizant of increasing public and academic scrutiny. They made an extra effort to avoid being interpreted politically, and emphasized their medical background and knowledge to increase public awareness about the pandemic. Aware of the social responsibility toward the public, they carefully considered their warning, and used euphemistic discourse to avoid hurting a third party's face, or criticizing the public or the establishment for a possible misdeed. Thus, one can readily argue that, in medical discourse as well as others, euphemism is used a safe ground for the speakers' criticism of addressees, while protecting their public image.

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