“Linguistic and Cultural Approaches to Menstruation Taboo and Euphemism”*

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Introduction

Taboos can be a big part of language and culture. Many of the everyday occurrences in life have taboos associated with them—death, defecation, and menstruation to name a few. Our cultural views as a society dictate how we address these taboos but a common way to verbally address taboos is avoidance. Members of a given society actively avoid speaking about taboo acts, people or situations by using euphemisms and metaphors. One taboo that crosses many cultures all over the world is the menstruation taboo. Despite the fact that menstruation is a natural process of the female body, it considered to be undesirable and dirty. However, there are many instances when it must be addressed and that is where the euphemisms come in.

This thesis will take a look at three different languages from different continents—Akan in Ghana, Kannada in India, and English in America—and the euphemisms for menstruation that are used within the societies that use these languages. Many cultures have had or still have a negative outlook on menstruation and this affects the euphemisms that are created. The negative views of menstruation help classify the different euphemisms. In addition to this, there are several key themes that play out in each society’s addressing of this taboo. Some cultures believe that menstrual fluid has the power to pollute everything. This belief leads to restrictions put on menstruating females and seclusion. The Akan people of Ghana believe that

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a menstruating woman is too unclean to cook food for men. From this belief, they developed a
euphemism that translates to ‘she does not go into the kitchen’. In Kannada, a language spoken
in Southwest India, the word used to describe dirty kitchens and saaris with cow dung on them
is also used to refer to menstrual blood. These examples highlight the two themes for
menstruation euphemisms of indisposition and pollution that I will touch upon within this
paper.

In my focus on the euphemisms themselves, I will also be exploring the idea of a
spectrum of what are called x-phemisms. Aside from euphemisms, societies may employ the
use of other x-phemisms: orthophemisms and dysphemisms—the direct addressing of a topic
and the more offensive way of speaking of a topic, respectively. Using theories of linguistic
politeness, I will be delving into the idea that euphemisms can move along the spectrum of x-
phemisms and become dysphemisms or orthophemisms. The face theory, in association with
Grice’s conversational maxims will come into play, as the theories of linguistic politeness. The
idea that discourse between members of a given society is regulated by mutually agreed upon
rules, has a large role in the creation of euphemisms.

As societies evolve, their euphemisms follow suit. This evolution may dictate where
certain euphemisms lie on the x-phemism spectrum or even if they will be discarded entirely.
Introduction to Taboo

The word “taboo” comes from the Tongan word *tabu*, which the English initially started using in the late eighteenth century. The Tongan culture of Polynesia, as well as many other cultures, believed that certain objects, actions, and words could expel harmful power onto people (Strazny 2005; 1073). According to Keith Allan and Kate Burridge in *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language*, taboo is a “proscription of behavior that affects everyday life” (Allan and Burridge 2006; 1). These taboos surround many different things ranging from names of ancestors to certain natural processes of the body.

Taboos generally come from social constrictions on behavior that may cause discomfort, harm or injury to the speaker or the listener (Allan and Burridge 2006; 1). What is considered a taboo and how each taboo is handled depends greatly on the cultural norms of a given society. These norms determine what is acceptable and what must be avoided (Strazny 2005; 1073). Because of this, we are constantly censoring our everyday language for all situations.

It should be noted that there are cultural taboos and linguistic taboos within every culture. Sometimes the linguistic taboos don’t align with a cultural taboo on a certain behavior; however, cultural taboos generally have corresponding linguistic taboo. In other words, it is possible to have a linguistic taboo on speaking about a certain behavior or process while the behavior itself is not taboo (i.e. menstruating as a natural process of the body is not a tabooed act but to speak about it candidly and directly is considered taboo in many cultures). Certain behaviors and practices are frowned upon in many different societies and the usage of particular words and phrases elicit the same or similar disapproval.
Taboos surround topics such as: bodies and their effluvia (sweat, snot, feces, 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 (Allan and Burridge 2006; 1). Across many different societies and cultures, people believe that these tabooed things have the ability to cause metaphysical, moral or physical harm and may lead to the contamination of others. Societies that recognize supernatural powers and show concern for offending nonhuman powers treat words very carefully due to the power that they associate with them and the possible supernatural consequences (Stazny 2005; 1073). To violate a taboo is to potentially suffer illness, death, corporal punishment, incarceration, social ostracism or simple disapproval (Allan and Burridge 2006; 27).

Linguistic Politeness

Taboo and censoring of language motivate language change by “promoting the creation of highly inventive and often playful new expressions, or new meanings for old expressions, causing existing vocabulary to be forgone” (Allan and Burridge 2006; 2). It is this change in language—the creation of euphemisms—that I will be focusing on throughout my thesis. Allan and Burridge (2006) examine politeness and impoliteness as they pertain to what is referred to as x-phemisms. X-phemisms are orthophemism (straight talk), euphemism (sweet talk), and dysphemism (offensive speech) (Allan and Burridge 2006; 1). For example, for the topic of defecation, an orthophemism would be ‘feces’; a possible euphemism would be ‘poop’; and a dysphemism would be ‘shit’. 
A dysphemism is a word or phrase with “connotations that are offensive either about the denotatum and/or to the people that are being addressed or have overheard the word or phrase” (Allan and Burridge 1991; 26). In other words, it is a phrase that employs the use of metaphor to speak indirectly about a subject but can result in discomfort for the speaker or the listener. Dysphemisms are considered to be the dispreferred language expressions and sometimes aim to insult or damage face. As alternatives to these less preferred language expressions, we use orthophemisms and euphemisms. Orthophemism refers to a word or phrase that that is more formal and more direct than the euphemism, while euphemisms are typically more colloquial and figurative (Allan and Burridge 2006; 33). In my thesis, I will be more concerned with examining the use of euphemism and the relationship between euphemisms and dysphemism.

X-phemisms and Face Theory

In general, the use of alternative expressions such as those classified as euphemisms and sometimes orthophemisms are tied to the idea of linguistic politeness in their attempt to maintain what is referred to as face (Allan and Burridge 2006; 32). One of the approaches to linguistic politeness involves “general conditions on the conventions of social activity types and their interaction orders” (Watts 2003; 119). More precisely, there are unspoken “rules” of discourse within a given society. Watts (2003) addresses linguistic politeness, basing this theory on a combination of Robin Lakoff’s rules of pragmatic competence and Paul Grice’s conversational maxims. Lakoff breaks down the “rules of politeness” into two categories: “be clear” and “be polite” (Watts 2003; 60). Under Lakoff’s rule of “be polite”, Watts adds the maxims “don’t impose”, “give options”, and “be friendly”. Under the rule of “be clear”, Watts
incorporates Grice’s maxims “quantity”, “quality”, “relevance”, and “manner”. The combination of the two sets of rules can be applied to face theory.

The face theory basically describes the nature of these conditions as saving/maintaining face. Face maintenance can be described as a balancing of trying to show “mutually shared forms of consideration” for others while not seeming to be uncooperative and losing respect that may be gained or desired in the eyes of others (Watts 2003; 120). In the simplest definition, face refers to one’s public image. Face is closely tied to feelings of embarrassment or humiliation, which are connected to vulnerability. This vulnerability is evidence for the emotional investment that is assigned to our face (Brown and Levinson 1987; 61). Due to this general vulnerability, people maintain one another’s face under the assumption that others will cooperate in this collective maintenance as a general rule of politeness.

To clarify, our use of euphemisms or “sweet talk” is not only to save our own face but also to save the face of others. Two aspects of face are reported by Brown and Levinson (1987). The first is the desire of a person to have their attributes, achievements, ideas, possessions and goals regarded well or highly by others in their community. The second aspect involves the want of a person to not be imposed upon or offended by others. By using a word, phrase or expression that is considered to be a dysphemism a person is not only risking being regarded less highly but they are also imposing upon their listener during the discourse. The Gricean maxim, “don’t impose”, can be applied here and there is a clear connection between the use of euphemisms and linguistic politeness.

An interesting thing to think about with regards to the use of orthophemisms, euphemisms and dysphemisms is that certain words or phrases can switch between these three
categories based on the context of their usage. For example, during moments of intimacy, a couple may refer to tabooed body parts in a way that would be considered dysphemistic in another situation such as a doctor’s surgery (Allan and Burridge 2006; 32). Or if an adult were to refer to the toilet as the “potty” with another adult, they may lose face. While the word “potty” is a euphemism commonly used to refer to the toilet by and to small children, it would not be acceptable for an adult to use the term in any other context, making it a dysphemism in that specific situation.

The idea that orthophemisms and euphemisms can be considered dysphemisms in a different context is one of the more interesting findings. I explained it to a friend and found that it has strong prevalence within intimate groups. By asking my friend what her first thought about me saying “feces” over “poop” was and “shit” over “feces” or “poop”. She reported that it would be strange for me to use the orthophemistic term “feces” due to the nature of our relationship. The term seemed too clinical and detached and caused her to think I was sarcastic. In that instance, the orthophemistic term is considered to be dysphemistic. If I said “poop”—a euphemism—she would think I was trying to be funny, using baby speech. In a setting where colloquial speech is often preferred, orthophemisms and euphemisms can easily be turned into dysphemisms.

Not only do euphemisms, orthophemisms and dysphemisms have an interchangeable nature within different contexts, but there are also dysphemistic euphemisms and euphemistic dyphemisms. This suggests that x-phemisms are on a spectrum. I will be taking this idea of fluidity between the dysphemisms and euphemisms into consideration when looking at the
euphemisms for menstruation. I will be trying to apply this idea to the euphemisms across cultures.

The Menstruation Taboo

I previously provided a list of common subjects that are considered to be taboo. My thesis will be focusing on the subject of menstruation and the linguistic taboos that are associated with it. A good amount of societies and cultures have taboos for menstruating women that have linguistic equivalents. Menstruation euphemisms can be broken down into different categories or themes (Allan and Burridge 1991; 81). Some of the themes that I will be touching upon include the theme of indisposition, antipathy, color, periodicity, visitor and reference to sanitary protection. In addition to those, there are the themes of pollution and power.

My focus in this thesis will be on menstruation euphemisms of three different cultures. I am interested to see how the different themes play a role in different cultures and which themes will be more prominent in each group or if any will be prominent in all three. I wanted to have examples from different geographic locations as well as different language families. The three languages I chose are the Akan language in Ghana, Kannada in South India and English (primarily in America). I will also be analyzing how the euphemisms in these different languages fit into the spectrum of x-phemisms.

The Akan of Ghana

Taboo adherence and morality go hand in hand and make people adhere to the norms, values and modes of behavior in their societies (Agyekum 2002; 370). According to Barbara Walker 8
Risch, taboo is indirect and its real object is not what is forbidden but the “cultural and social circumstances affected by the prohibitions” (qtd in Agyekum 2002; 370). From this, we can glean that verbal taboo and social norms are intertwined. As Farb says (1971; 91): “Any word is an innocent collection of sounds until a community surrounds it with connotations and then decrees that it cannot be used in certain speech situations. It is the symbolic value the specific culture attaches to the words and expressions that make them become taboo” (qtd in Agyekum 2002; 370).

Amongst Akan speakers, taboos are separated into four different categories; akyiwade, abusude, abususen, and ammodin. In akyiwade, the verb kyiri is ‘to abhor, hate, to taboo’, and the noun ade is a ‘thing’. The combination of the two words form the nominal, akyiwade, which literally means ‘tabooed thing’. This term mostly refers to prohibited things like forbidden foods or activities (Agyekum 2002; 370). The second category of taboos is abusude which can be broken down into the busu meaning ‘woe’ and ade meaning ‘thing’. This refers to acts, events, and things that are prohibited and can be used as a synonym for akyiwade. In the word abususen, we see the busu again. This combined with sen forms the meaning ‘woeful expressions or sayings’, which is used to refer to verbal taboos (Agyekum 2002; 370).

The category of verbal taboos within the Akan can be broken down further into four subcategories. The first is the ntam, literally ‘reminiscential oath’, which refers to disasters such as death of a chief, famine, loss of a war, or epidemic that affect a person, family, community or state in the past (Agyekum 2002; 370). The aforementioned events and more that may fall into this category are considered to be not worthy of mentioning due to a fear of reoccurrence. Another subcategory is the duabo, ‘grievance imprecation’. This category covers the invocation
of a deity to unleash a curse upon the wrongdoer or the invocator. The third is the opposite of the *duabo*, the *nsedie*, which refers to the speaker invoking the wrath of a deity to let loose a curse upon the speaker him/herself. The final subcategory of these verbal taboos is the *atennidie*, the ‘invective’ that involves “negative reference to the origin and genealogy, deformity and invalidity, and sex organs of the listener” (Agyekum 2002; 371).

The final category of taboo is the *ammodin* which is made up of the verb *bɔ*, meaning ‘mention’, and the noun *din*, meaning ‘name’. These two words combined with the nominal prefix *a*- and the negative prefix *m*- form the literal meaning ‘unmentionables’. *Ammodin* refers to items or occurrences that appear in day-to-day conversation but should not be mentioned plainly (Agyekum 2002; 371). This category covers things like death; sexual organs; names of wild trees, plants, and animals; scatological fluids like menstruation and defecation; pregnancy; and the unadorned names of chiefs (Agyekum 2002; 371). Objects that fall into the *ammodin* category of taboos are salt, brooms and mortar. These objects are considered to be essential to every household and to not have them is what would be considered *ammodin*. If a household does not have one of these items, they must go to another household and say *merepe ammodin* which means ‘I want the unmentionable’. By using *ammodin* expressions, the speaker or listener can lose face.

Akan euphemisms are termed *kasambrami* which literally means ‘language used as cover ups’. It is made up of the word *kasa*, ‘language’, the nominal prefix *m-*, the verb *bra* (‘cover’), and the noun *ani* (‘face’). For the Akan, much like many other cultures, euphemisms are a kind of “shield against the offensive nature of taboo expressions” (Agyekum 2002; 372). According to Agyekum, they allow the speaker to avoid the strict rules surrounding verbal
taboo. The Akan see euphemisms as verbal art forms that embellish speech in an attempt to show communicative competence and linguistic politeness (Agyekum 2002; 372).

Menstruation in Akan is *kyima* (Agyekum 2002; 372). Akan speakers from teenage and adult females to male medicine peddlers, doctors and traditional healers, try to avoid mentioning menstruation as much as possible. The topic, however, is impossible to avoid due to its prevalence within everyday life. Thus, the use of euphemisms is common when addressing the subject of menstruation. Akan women will use euphemisms in their own discussions that involve complaints about a menstrual problem, or as a way to avoid performing certain domestic activities and obligations. The euphemisms used are representations of the prevalent Akan cultural attitudes and perceptions about menstruation (Agyekum 2002; 372).

An important observation to note about the use of menstrual euphemisms in the Akan culture is that who uses these expressions, to whom, when, where and in which situations is important to the interpretation of the euphemisms. Because menstruation is a natural process in the female body, euphemisms are normally used by women. In most cases, the Akan will speak of menstruation through euphemisms between women but married women will use some euphemisms with their husbands. “Euphemisms are also used between lovers, intimate women, peer group adolescents and adolescent girls and their mothers” (Agyekum 2002; 372). Men will very rarely, if ever, initiate a discourse about menstruation, euphemistic or otherwise, because they consider it to be “messy talk” (Agyekum 2002; 372). Male doctors may engage in a conversation with a menstruating woman about problems, but this is still usually initiated by the woman and can be in plain speech or in euphemistic speech. Peddlers who sell herbs and such along the roads will generally use some of the euphemistic expressions when talking about
herbs for treating menstrual, sexual and feminine ailments (Agyekum 2002; 373). The euphemisms for menstruation are taken very seriously and not to be used in lighthearted contexts. They are an adult phenomenon and are generally not used by children. Another point to take note of is that Agyekum (2002; 373) reports it is very doubtful whether one person knows all of the euphemisms.

**Two Models of Euphemisms for Menstruation**

In his study of the Akan euphemism for menstruation, Agyekum identified two models within which the euphemisms fall; negative and positive. These two models are based on the idea of menstruation as filth or pollution and its importance which is an idea that encompasses the association of power, purification and fertility with menstruation.

**The Negative Model**

*Pollution*—Within the negative model, menstruation is viewed as filthy and debilitating with menstrual blood being considered as toxic and polluted (Agyekum 2002; 374). Among the Akan, menstrual blood is one of the most revolting and polluted substances and a lot of care is taken to avoid speaking of it directly. This part of the negative model emphasizes the men’s purity and male superiority in male-dominated societies such as the Akan (Agyekum 2002; 374). Menstruation is considered to be a pollutant that weakens a woman and this debilitating quality is thought to have the potential to transfer to a male partner and could even lead to the male’s death. This aspect of the negative model is one that is shared by many different societies and is part of the reason why menstruation is considered a universal taboo (Agyekum 2002; 374).
Failed Production- There is another aspect of the negative model that considers what a menstruating woman represents. There is a belief among the Akan people that menstruation is a barrier to conception and even procreation. This is due to the simple fact that if a woman is menstruating then she is not pregnant. In a situation when a couple is trying to have a baby, menstruation is seen as a curse (Agyekum 2002; 374). To further explain the failed production view of menstruation, an analogy between menstruation and a factory is quoted by Agyekum (2002; 375): “menstruation not only carries with it the connotation of a productive system that has failed, it also carries the idea of production gone awry, making products of no use”. In traditional rural Akan homes, childbirth is prestigious so the metaphor of failed production is very prevalent (Agyekum 2002; 375).

Indisposition- Akan men generally avoid menstruating women. This includes avoiding eating food prepared by menstruating women or engaging in sexual activity with a menstruating woman. The term ‘indisposition’ here refers to expressions that “semantically denote that the menstruating woman cannot perform her normal domestic duties, including sex” (Agyekum 2002; 375). The most popular expression for indisposition among the Akan are:

(1) *cabu ne nsa*
‘she has broken her hands’

(2) *bukyia mu afɔ*
‘the hearth is wet’

In (1) a woman breaking her hands is a metaphor for menstruation that I believe comes from the fact that men will not eat food prepared by a menstruating woman. She cannot cook food for a man so her hands might as well be broken because they are useless to her in
performing her domestic duties. The example in (2) is rather obvious in meaning. If a hearth is wet it is unusable. In a similar sense, a menstruating woman is indisposed and cannot perform the household duties expected of her. Another interpretation of (2) could be that the ‘hearth’ is a metaphor for the menstruating woman’s vagina and the word ‘wet’ references the menstrual blood. This coincides with the indisposition theme in that the menstruating woman is unable to perform in any sexual activity. She might use this euphemism to warn a sexual partner that she cannot be engaged in sexual activity.

(3) *onte yie*

‘She is not well’

Akan women who live in rural areas and more traditional women might discuss menstruation among themselves. It is due to this that expressions of indisposition are generally used by wives to their husbands when they cannot perform their domestic duties (Agyekum 2002: 376). An Akan woman may also use the term *mente yie*, ‘I do not sit well’, to warn a lover that she is menstruating in order to be excused from her domestic activities (Agyekum 2002: 376). A mother may also use the euphemism in (3) to defend her daughter when accused of not cooking or failing to perform sacred rituals at home or in the community activities (Agyekum 2002: 376). This euphemism may not only be used for menstruation. By saying that a girl or woman is ‘unwell’ in this context could still be very ambiguous. Many different illnesses could be referred to through this statement. It is this ambiguity that helps uphold conversational politeness.

*Seclusion*—The aspect of seclusion reflects the community’s attitudes towards women. Euphemisms of seclusion can be viewed as tools for suppressing and oppressing women and
lowering their status in male-dominated societies that have a tendency to isolate menstruating women (Agyekum 2002; 376). Due to the belief among the Akan that menstruating women are unclean and must not be allowed to enter sacred places menstruating women are prevented from having much interaction in the community. It was because of these beliefs that women in earlier times were required to go behind the house during their menstruation. However, in recent times, this tradition has been broken down and is no longer followed (Agyekum 2002; 376).

Many of the seclusion euphemisms are marked by verbs of motion followed by a reference to specific culturally restricted places where menstruating women are not allowed to enter or are secluded to (Agyekum 2002; 376).

(4) ṣako afikyire
‘she has gone behind the house’

(5) ṣnko gya ho
‘she does not go to the kitchen’

The euphemism in (4) alludes to the idea that a menstruating woman is an outcast and must be sent away because of her uncleanliness. She is secluded to a place designated for menstruating women called the afikyire. Once a woman’s cycle is over, she cannot return to her home until the head of the household sprinkles her with purified water (Agyekum 2002; 377). Not only are menstruating women restricted from entering certain public and sacred places but she is also not allowed to enter her own home—she must stay in the house designated for menstruating women, the afikyire. A menstruating woman cannot enter the chief’s palace because it is implied in many of the beliefs of the Akana people that menstrual blood could
reduce the powers of the gods and stools at the palace. The euphemisms of seclusion are used for excusing a menstruating woman from attending a palace visit or for excusing the woman from any special political or domestic roles (Agyekum 2002; 377).

The euphemistic expression in (5) shows that women who are menstruating are restricted from cooking for men. This type of expression is generally used by women to their husbands. When asked to make dinner or cook any meal by her husband, all a wife would need to do is say ‘I do not go to the kitchen’ and the husband would understand that she is menstruating and is therefore forbidden to cook for any adult males. This does not mean that she is barred from cooking entirely. For the Akan, menstruating women can cook for other women of all ages and young males but not adult males (Agyekum 2002; 378). That being said, this euphemism would only be used by a wife to a husband or a girlfriend to a boyfriend.

The Positive Model

Power and Purification- The positive model for menstruation taboos focuses on the importance that the Akan culture put on menstruation. There is a sense of gender purity and the powerful and purifying aspects of menstruation (Agyekum 2002; 378). The Akan believe that menstrual blood can be used to make love potions and charms. Menstrual blood is used in some symbolic objects of power and protection in order to protect a person from threatening forces (Agyekum 2002; 378). While seclusion of menstruating women is an idea that is generally rooted in the negative model aspect of seclusion, it also has some roots in the positive model. It is believed that a woman is at the height of her powers when she is menstruating and should meditate. Isolating herself is then encouraged in order to help her better focus that energy on meditation. This can be viewed as making the woman holy (Agyekum 2002; 379). Among the
Akan, menstruation is also seen as positive for health reasons. A woman who has just given birth can only have sex with her husband after she has her first menstruation after the birth (Agyekum 2002; 379).

_Fertility and Transition_- Some of the other euphemistic expressions used by the Akan fall under the fertility and transition aspect of the positive model. Within this aspect, menstruation emphasizes the benefits of fertility. Among many cultures, Akan included, menstruation is considered a precursor to the real life of a girl. A big part of the first menstruation is that it symbolizes the transition from girlhood to womanhood (Agyekum 2002; 380). The Akan celebrate the first menstruation of a girl in their community. This puts menstruation in a positive light and leads to euphemisms such as those listed below:

(6) **Jayi ne ho**

‘she has shaved herself’

(7) **Jo-ye asakyima**

‘she has flowered’

In (6), the euphemism refers to the transition from girl to woman in a similar way that other cultures might mark the transition from boy to man. By noting that ‘she has shaved herself’ they are calling attention to the fact that the girl is old enough to grow pubic hair and thus able to shave it (Agyekum 2002; 381). By the time a girl reaches her first menstruation, she is old enough to shave herself. This can be compared to American culture when a boy has started growing facial hair, which is commonly seen as one of the turning points into manhood.

The euphemism in (7) highlights a very common theme for female transition. Many cultures liken the transition from girlhood to womanhood to a blossoming flower. By saying that a girl
has flowered, they are calling attention to the fact that she is mature and eligible to produce fruits (Agyekum 2002; 380). The menstrual blood is the flower that must blossom before the baby (or the fruit) can emerge, making the flower symbolize menstruation and the fruit symbolize childbirth.

Some euphemisms used by the Akan relate to the blood itself. These euphemisms may fall under the aspect of transition due to the fact that blood itself is a mode of transition. By reaching the point in life when she receives her first menstruation, a girl is in transition to becoming a woman. The blood of menstruation is then associated with this transition. Menstrual blood is compared to anything that is red and these similes are used as euphemisms (Agyekum 2002; 381). A menstruating woman’s genitals may be compared to a gyamma fruit, which is a tree that bears red fruits. This euphemism references the transition from having no fruit to bearing fruit. Another analogy is one of palm oil to menstrual blood.

(8) *ngo kokoo af3 no*

‘I was soiled with palm oil’

The Akan may say that a menstruating woman is soiled with palm oil that is colored red. The euphemism in (8) might be used in the context of an explanation why a woman did not attend some sort of event. It is usually used by a woman to her lover to explain a specific disappointment. Another interesting comparison is the analogy of menstruation to the death of an elephant. When an Akan says *sakum sono* (‘she has killed an elephant’) they are referring to the amount of blood that is shed when a woman menstruates. To them, the elephant is one of the biggest animals in the world and has a large amount of blood (Agyekum 2002; 381). During her menstrual cycle, a woman is considered to have bled a great deal and when an elephant is
killed, a large amount of blood is shed. This particular comparison doesn’t seem to fit as well into either the positive or negative models for menstruation taboo. The focus on blood in this euphemism might put it into the transition aspect in a similar vein as the gyamma fruit.

Arrival of a Protective Visitor- Within this aspect of the positive model, euphemisms are considered to be positive due to their connection with a protective entity. Some women use the euphemisms in this aspect as excuses to avoid having sex even when they are not menstruating. When a woman uses the euphemisms in this aspect, the man she is addressing becomes a little scared and does not insist on having sex (Agyekum 2002; 382). These euphemisms are used positively by menstruating women to avoid being victimized by men. The Akan also personify menstruation as a visitor.

(9) akoa no abeduru
‘the man has arrived’

The personification of menstruation among the Akan is an akoa (‘male’) rival. This rival comes to protect the woman and keep other males from entering her vagina. If a woman uses this euphemism and the man she is addressing disregards it, it is believe that he is risking defilement and the contraction of diseases like syphilis (Agyekum 2002; 382). This euphemism and others like it are generally used by wives and girlfriends to husbands and boyfriends in situations when the man wants to have sex but the woman is saying that it is not possible. The euphemism in (9) would very rarely be used or even known by younger members of the Akan community.

Creating Akan Dysphemisms
With the strict contextualization of the euphemisms among the Akan, creating dysphemisms from the euphemisms can be done very easily. If the euphemistic expressions used between lovers were used in another situation, such as between a female patient and her doctor, the result would be a loss of face and the slight degradation of either the speaker or the listener. Due to this strong adherence to proper context for each euphemism, I believe that the degree of injury to reputation would change depending on the type of euphemism that is used. For instance, if a female patient used a euphemism such as the example in (9), she may damage the doctor’s face. By using the protective visitor euphemism, she would be implying that she is trying to avoid sex. This would undoubtedly offend the listener due to the accusatory nature the euphemism would create. On the other hand, this could merely be a blow to the speaker’s reputation. The connotations that surround the idea of a protective male visitor might just lead a male who is not intimate with the speaker to find her use of the euphemism strange and unnecessary. She would be then making her listener uncomfortable by imposing on him.

Another instance when a possible dysphemism would be created is if one used the examples in (6) and (7) to refer to a menstruating woman who is not experiencing her first menstruation. In an instance when the woman is much older, it may be counted as offensive to use example (6) when talking about an older woman who is menstruating. To mention that she is old enough to shave may imply that the speaker is asserting some sort of superiority over the woman they are referring to. This could change a euphemistic expression into a dysphemistic one. Depending on the setting, the examples in (4) and (5) might become more of a dysphemistic way of addressing a woman’s menstruation. If used in a more modern, urban setting, the woman to whom the expression refers may take offense to the dated idea of
household obligations. The euphemism in (5) especially could come off as a rude assumption that the referent should be cooking. Or the use of (4) may imply that the speaker still believes that women should be secluded during her menstruation.

The strict attitude around who uses the different euphemisms also leads me to some interesting conclusions regarding the creation of dysphemisms among the Akan. Seeing as most of the euphemisms would only be initiated by women, I believe that should a male initiate a euphemism for menstruation he would be automatically creating a dysphemism. I would go as far as to say that in itself would be taboo. The Akan seem to take menstruation taboos very seriously and for a male to initiate a euphemism outside of the context of patient care, herb peddling and the occasional explanation as to why a female family member is to be excused from a public event, it might not be acceptable. Even in those designated situations, the seriousness of the taboo would lead me to believe that most men would avoid the topic as much as possible.

Kannada in India

The second language and culture that I will be looking at is the Kannada, located in South India. All of the Kannada euphemisms that I reference in this thesis were collected from Susan B. Bean’s article, Toward a Semiotics of “Purity” and “Pollution” in India. I chose this language because it handles taboos quite differently from English cultures and the Akan. There is larger focus on the themes of “purity” and “pollution” in the data that I have collected from this language. The data from Kannada is split into two categories: language of “pollution” and language of “purity”. Based on previous knowledge of the common themes surrounding
menstruation, it would be acceptable to assume that most of the language used to refer to menstruation falls under the category of “pollution”. This lines up very well with some of the beliefs of the Akan that were previously touched upon.

Within the Kannada language, there are many different ways to address “pollution” and “purity”. In her article, Toward a Semiotics of “Purity” and “Pollution” in India, Bean studied the different words for “pollution” and “purity” in the Kannada language. Each of the terms used for these categories describes conditions of people and things rather than behaviors or practices (Bean 1981; 577). Bean describes the use of each term and what types of “pollution” or “purity” they are depicting. All of the terms are used for multiple types of polluted states and some states of pollution have multiple terms that are used to refer to it. I am exclusively looking into the terms that refer to menstruation or menstruating women.

An initial look at the terms used revealed that a majority of the time the “pollution” associated with menstruation was also associated with death and giving birth. An example of this would be the word aNTu, which Bean glosses as ‘sticky or defiled’ (Bean 1981; 580). This word, used in different contexts, can mean many different things. In some contexts, it is used to refer to contagious diseases while in others it is used to for “ritual defilement”. This “ritual defilement” usage is generally applied to menstruating women, a household after a birth, and families in which a death has occurred.

(10) sottre aNTu
    ‘if death [occurs] aNTu’

(11) horage aNTu
'outside aNTu' (menstrual exclusion)

(12)  herige aNTu

‘delivery aNTu’

The examples in (10), (11), and (12) are states of ritualistic “defilement” (Bean 1981; 580). Each one is intrinsically part of life and unavoidable due to their cyclical nature. The example in (11) is of more interest to me because it is a representation of the avoidance of speaking of menstruation within the Kannada language. The word aNTu does not specifically mean ‘menstruation’ but when coupled with the word horage, ‘outside’, it clearly refers to the state of being secluded during one’s menstruation.

I also want to note that the other contextual meaning of aNTu is not entirely lost in these instances. The sense of a contagion remains prevalent in the context of “ritual defilement” as well. These euphemistic ways of dealing with “pollution” connect back to the cultural taboo of interacting with people in such states of “defilement”. It is believed that if one comes into contact with a menstruating woman, a woman who has just given birth or enters a household in which there has been a death then that person is infected by the defilement that is associated with these states (Bean 1981; 580).

The second pollution term that is important to point out is mailige, ‘unwashed, dirty’. This term can be used in very simple contexts to describe everyday situations like walking through town and becoming naturally dirty. However, it can also be used as a synonym of aNTu.

(13)  mailige maaDbiTTu

‘having become mailige’
The expression in (13) is used when speaking of menstruating women, a woman after giving birth, or a wife after a death in the family. In each of these instances, the person being referred to is considered to have become “unwashed” or “dirty”. An interesting difference between mailige and aNTu is that some people do not believe that mailige of menstruation, birth and death can be passed to others through touch or even by eating food prepared by a menstruating woman (Bean 1981; 581). With this term, there isn’t the same level of association with contagion.

The final term that describes the relevant types of pollution is suutaka, ‘death pollution, and birth pollution’. This word is borrowed from Sanskrit and does not have an opposing term of “purity” (something I’d like to address later—I would specifically like to talk about this in terms of levels of purity and impurity within the terms). The term suutaka is used, in some contexts, to describe the condition of a menstruating woman (usually the first menstruation), a household after a recent birth, and a family with a recent death (Bean 1981; 582). These three events are considered to be important rites of passage that affect not only the person immediately involved but those around them and their homes as well.

Some consider suutaka to be very potent and that it can be passed onto others, causing aNTu or mailige. Those who are considered to be in the suutaka state are secluded and avoided by others. These people cannot bathe or wear any auspicious signs or accessories until their period of defilement has ended. The period of suutaka is very much associated with cultural taboos and there are rituals that are performed to counteract the state of “defilement”. There are different lengths and severities of suutaka that affect cultural practices. The most severe
state of *suutaka* is for death; then, the next is for birth; and the final and least severe is for first menstruation (Bean 1981; 582). Each of these tabooed states has a different length and a different amount of cleansing that follows. The more severe the state of “defilement”, the longer that person(s) has to wait before cleansing. Once the period of “defilement” is over, rituals to bring “purity” are performed.

**Dysphemisms in Kannada**

The Akan language lent itself to the theory of euphemisms becoming dysphemisms and in its own way, Kannada does as well. Here I’d like to take a minute to re-define dysphemism. A dysphemistic expression is one that has offensive connotations for the speaker or the listener. While euphemisms are meant to save *face* of both the speaker and listener, dysphemisms are less neutral and by nature, are seen as impolite. In the Akan, I explored the idea of turning the euphemistic expressions into dysphemistic ones. Essentially, I re-arranged the contexts in which each expression is appropriate and placed them in less appropriate instances.

In the Kannada language data, there isn’t a clear context in which each expression is considered appropriate. However, there are some very clear associations for each term. Naturally, referring to someone as *aNTu* or *mailige* in certain situations is inappropriate. Due to the difference in their association with contagion, I feel that in some contexts *aNTu*, which is more closely associated with a contagion, would be less appropriate than the use of *mailige*. By using *aNTu* to refer to another, one would be pointing out that others should not come in contact with the referent. This would be especially inappropriate if someone of lower status were to refer to a person of higher status in such a way.
There is also a connection between status and terms of “pollution” and “purity”. Bean reports that mailige is often used by Brahmins to refer to others of lower status (Bean 1981; 581). They may say things such as:

(14)  *aoče nilisoodu muTTiskeNolla niinu mailige aagidde*

‘[I] won’t be made to touch [you], you are mailige’

The type of “defilement” in (14) need not be specified—menstruation, death or afterbirth mailige—when switching to a dysphemistic expression. In this case, a person of higher status could use such an expression to purposely neglect saving the face of their listener. I would even make a case that this could be interpreted as a dysphemistic euphemism. The speaker can be considered to be saving their own face by not specifying the type of defilement but by addressing someone in such a way, they are risking the face of their listener.

**English**

The third language that I will be analyzing euphemisms from is English. As a native speaker, I chose this language as my basis. I have ample amount of data and many of the theories on euphemism have already been applied to English. My English euphemisms for menstruation were collected through a combination of books as well as women I have come in contact with and my own knowledge of euphemisms I have heard and used. I asked a few of my female friends and family members to provide for me ways in which they talk about their menstruation and in what contexts. I then incorporated the euphemisms I collected from them

In Allan and Burridge’s book, *Euphemism & Dysphemism*, the euphemisms for menstruation in English generally fit into six different categories or themes. Many of the euphemisms used to address the topic of menstruation or menstruating women follow one or more of these themes. The first theme is illness, indisposition, or discomfort. Menstruation itself can be painful to the point of indisposition. This natural indisposition plays a large role in the negative views of menstruation and the euphemisms that result.

Some euphemisms for menstruation are based on color associations. Different groups of people will use color metaphors that are significant to that specific culture; America is no different. Another theme invokes metaphors for protective measures against menstruation (i.e. the use of objects that are similar in appearance to sanitary napkins and tampons). There is also the theme of periodicity which focuses on the timeline of menstruation as a monthly event that lasts for a short period of time. The theme of antipathy villainizes menstruation and is a result of the negative views that are associated with it. The last theme that I will cover for English euphemisms is the theme of the visitor. You will see an interesting difference between the English and Akan euphemisms that fall into this theme.

**Indisposition**

The theme of indisposition or discomfort that I previously talked about within the Akan euphemisms is also present in English. This could be because many cultures often associate the loss of blood with injury and loss of strength (Allan and Burridge 2006; 166). It could also be a result of the fact that there is a natural indisposition associated with menstruation. Often times,
a woman’s menstruation is accompanied by menstrual cramps, or dysmenorrhea. These cramps are the reason many women experience discomfort during their menstrual cycle. They can become so bad that they lead to indisposition and thus, many of the euphemisms used to talk about menstruation refer to the discomfort. For example:

(15) the cramps

(16) [I/she] is unwell

The phrase in (15) is quite frequently used to allude to menstruation. Many women will offer up phrases like ‘I have cramps’ or ‘my cramps are really bad’ as explanations for why they cannot attend various types of gatherings. Using this phrase provides an opportunity to explain one’s indisposition or discomfort without going into great detail. For instance, a woman may ask her friend—who looks as if she is not feeling well—what is wrong and the friend might respond with, “I have cramps”. Most women will understand what is meant by this and will require no elaboration. Whenever I have used this euphemism, I received knowing nods the conversation is dropped thereafter.

In addition, the sentence in (16) may be used to explain someone’s absence from various gatherings or their neglect of duties that may require higher amounts of movement. This generally does not require further explanation. It is considered to be one of the more discrete ways of addressing menstruation because it is very non-specific; there could be numerous reasons for a woman being described as ‘unwell’. The sentence in (16) is also sometimes preferred by many women because it doesn’t require them to use language that is
uncomfortable. To say someone is “unwell” is a way to allude to illness of any sort and provides a sense of privacy.

Menstruation causes indisposition in many different ways. There is the dysmenorrhea but there is also the taboo on engaging in sexual activity with a menstruating woman. Due to this taboo, there are euphemisms that communicate this indisposition.

(17) closed for repairs/maintenance
(18) having the painters in

These phrases are often used to convey that a woman is not able to perform in any sexual activity; (17) very clearly conveys this message. The idea that a woman is “closed” has many interpretations. The first interpretation coincides with the theme of referencing sanitary protection, which I will address in the sections to come. This interpretation merely links the use of sanitary products like tampons and pads to closing up a shop for repairs. When a shop is closed for such occasions, one might board up the entrances so as to discourage entrance. Sanitary protection measures can be thought of in the similar way.

In reference to sex, there is the visual of “closed legs”. One of the common euphemisms for sex involves statements like ‘her legs are open’ or ‘she’ll open her legs for anyone’ which are dysphemistic ways of alluding to a woman who is sexually active. Similarly, to refer to someone who is not sexually active or “unattainable” phrases like ‘her legs are closed’ might be used. This notion of a woman opening or closing herself plays into the euphemism in (17). Along with this, there is the association between menstruation and injury. Saying that someone is ‘closed for repairs’, implies that something caused a need for repair.
The phrase in (18) combines two of the themes for menstruation euphemisms. The reference to ‘painters’ connects to the color theme. At the thought of painters, one may immediately think of the possible colors that they can be painting. In this context, the color red would readily come to mind. At the same time, the event of ‘having painters in’ is connected to the indisposition theme. When someone has painters in to paint rooms in a home, they vacate the area of all belongings and the room is out of use for the duration of the painting. In a similar fashion, the cultural taboos surrounding menstruation dictate that a menstruating woman must be “closed off” to all sexual activity for the duration of her menstruation.

According to some of the women I have talked to, these euphemisms are used quite frequently for or by their significant others. A woman may respond to her partner’s sexual advances with a version of the euphemism in (17) or (18). However, these two euphemisms can become dysphemisms very easily. Due to their association with sexual activity, their use in certain contexts can be uncomfortable for the referent as well as the person being addressed. It would not be appropriate to use these euphemisms in any professional context. In fact, these euphemisms may only be euphemistic when used by people who are extremely familiar with one another.

The Color Red

As (18) introduced, the red color of blood is so salient that a large quantity of euphemisms can be created based on color metaphors. These metaphors connect the color associations of everyday things or occurrences with menstruation. The Akan used a red fruit-
bearing tree and in English we do similar things. Take for instance the following two
euphemisms:

(19) the cavalry’s arrived
(20) riding the red wave

Just as (18) took a less direct route of initiating color reference, (19) follows in the same
vein. The cavalry is a reference to the red coats of the British cavalry from pre-twentieth-
century (Allan and Burridge 1991; 82). I find this euphemism to be intriguing because when I
first heard it, it confused me. Other than the color reference, which I barely acknowledged
upon first hearing, there is nothing about menstruation that I would associate with a cavalry.
When I think of cavalry, I usually envisioned a sense of relief. I think of being in a rough spot,
needing help and finally getting it. The only time I would connect that feeling with menstruation
is maybe in the case of an unwanted pregnancy scare. An alternative interpretation could be a
reference of blood, not just by color. The military is readily associated with violence, death and
blood, so the arrival of the ‘cavalry’ could be a reference to blood being spilt.

A more direct color reference can be found in (20). It directly mentions the color ‘red’,
leaving little room for differing interpretations. The addition of the word ‘wave’ can very easily
provide the visual of a liquid discharge. It can also be a metaphor for the discomfort
experienced during menstruation. The thought of a wave can be connected to chaos or it can
be a reference to the back and forth motion of waves which can cause seasickness. This
euphemism lends itself to vivid associations, which allow it to become more dysphemistic in
multiple contexts. This is not the type of euphemism that is safe for work or professional
settings. It breaches the “don’t impose” maxim of polite discourse. By using this euphemism, the speaker may invoke the visuals that are considered to be uncomfortable and imposing this upon the listener would risk the face of the speaker. It is this aspect of the euphemism in (20) that causes it to be considered a dysphemistic euphemism. It is not quite a dysphemism because the intent may not be to offend. Yet it does cause discomfort with its invocation of graphic visuals.

Much like (18) and (19), the following euphemism indirectly uses a color reference:

(21) my communist friend

This euphemism uses the “Red Scare” of the early to mid-twentieth-century for the color association. The communists were often referred to as “the reds” due to their allegiance to the red flag of the Soviet Union\(^1\). This has a combination of both the color theme and the visitor theme, which will be covered in the next section. However, this particular euphemism has a very distinct negative connotation that differs from the euphemisms categorized by the visitor theme. The hysteria that was connected to the “Red Scare” alludes to the negative views of menstruation. The discomfort and moodiness that may be experienced during menstruation is referenced by this metaphor.

The euphemism in (21) is less frequently used by women from younger generations and even women from older generations are rarely heard using it. I chose to incorporate this euphemism to focus on how much effect each culture has on the euphemisms that are developed as well as how much they can change in short periods of time. This might have been

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a frequently used euphemism during the years following the Cold War but during the Cold War I would imagine that it was more on the dysphemistic end of the spectrum. There was quite a bit of hysteria surrounding the “Red Scare” and someone making a mention of their ‘communist friend’ arriving, would undoubtedly make the addressee uncomfortable. Now, I feel like (21) remains dysphemistic mostly due to the fact that it is less likely to be known. If someone told me that their ‘communist friend’ was visiting, I would be confused by and uncomfortable with the reference. The relevancy of Communism to the average American today is not high enough for this to be a mutually understandable euphemism. If this were used around the people that it would be more relevant to it would still be very dysphemistic due to the cultural history that is associated with this reference.

The Visitor

Another very common theme is that of the visitor. In the Akan euphemisms, the visitor euphemisms always involved a protective male. In contrast, the English ‘visitors’ can be female or male.

(22) a visit from Aunt Flo/Tillie
(23) Miss Dot
(24) I’ve got Fred/George/Jack

The idea of the ‘visitor’ may come from how temporary menstruation generally is. Some have also made a connection between the nuisance that visitors can pose and the variety of annoyances that menstruation also poses. As for the names, the select few names that are used in these euphemisms (with the exception of ‘Aunt Flo’ and ‘Miss Dot’) have no known
connection and are seemingly randomly chosen (Allan and Burridge 1991; 82). In addition, the reasoning behind the use of male names remains unknown. Regarding this, a couple of theories have emerged. The first is rather dated and is built on the assumption that the majority of women are heterosexual. This theory is that in circumstances separate from menstruation, the ‘visitor’ to the vagina would be male and therefore male names are used as an analogy. The second theory is more of a humorous female point-of-view that paints menstruation as a pain comparable to men (Allan and Burridge 1991; 82).

A visit from ‘Aunt Flo’ in (22) is used very frequently in my experience; I heard this even before I knew anything about menstruation. The use of the name ‘Flo’ is almost assuredly due to its association with the word “flow”. This has obvious connections to menstrual discharge and is often used in relation to menstruation (describing light or heavy flow which is relevant for sanitary protection). The other two names mentioned in (22) are usually accompanied with a location that incorporates a color association like ‘Aunt Tillie from Red Bank’. Not only does the color imply blood flow but the use of the word ‘bank’ can be associated with the bank of a river, which can be further connected to flowing liquid. The euphemism in (23) uses the female title of ‘miss’ and the name ‘Dot’. This name, like ‘Flo’ can be directly connected to menstruation. The name ‘Dot’ can be referring to the first signs of menstruation as mere spotting instead of a full-fledged “flow”. The use of a name that refers to the beginning of menstruation can mean that this euphemism is mainly used to talk about the first menstruation.

I had a harder time trying to come up with contexts that would make these euphemisms more dysphemistic. The male visitors may be more readily interpreted as dysphemisms than
the female visitors. This may only be because they are less commonly used and that leaves more room for confusion. In professional settings especially, these euphemisms may cause discomfort and lead to a loss of face. If a colleague said to another “I’ve got Fred”, more explanation may be needed. This further explanation can lead to the abandonment of euphemisms altogether in order to remedy the confusion. In contrast, the euphemisms in (22) are much more common and leave less room for different interpretations.

**Reference to Sanitary Protection**

As exhibited, rather indirectly, in (17) reference to sanitary protection measures for menstruation are also commonly used in euphemisms. Despite being a separate theme, ‘sanitary protection’ itself is a euphemism with links to the theme of indisposition (Allan and Burridge 1991; 82). By using the word “sanitary” there is an inherent implication that menstruation is “dirty” and “unclean”; there is also the implication that menstrual fluids are something we should be “protected” from. This could be remnants of our society’s focus on “purity”.

Within this theme, there are dated euphemisms that have still maintained prevalence among younger generations. For example:

(25) on the rag

This refers to less commonly used sanitary protection measures. Before pads or tampons were in popular use, rags were used as underwear liners. There are still a few euphemisms for menstruation that use references to ‘the rag’. These euphemisms are more classified as
dysphemistic euphemisms or just as dysphemisms. This is true for most of the euphemisms within this theme.

(26) riding the cotton pony
(27) plugged up
(28) covering the waterfront

All of the euphemisms listed above can be classified as dysphemistic euphemisms. This could be due to the fact that the theme of ‘sanitary protection’ is already a euphemism that is associated with indisposition, an relatively negative theme. Despite this, it is more likely that the use of metaphors involving sanitary protection, another tabooed topic, is the source of their dysphemistic nature. Many women feel uncomfortable even mentioning tampons or pads in public. I have spent many shopping trips with friends being surprised at their determination to avoid speaking of any sanitary product by name.

The brand name “Tampax” has even become a euphemism for tampons—a good amount of college-aged women will ask for a Tampax as opposed to asking for a ‘tampon’—because of how uncomfortable many people are with talking about the products themselves. It is as if the very products that are meant for sanitation and cleanliness are so connected with the “dirtiness” of menstruation that they too have been pulled under the taboo. With this association so strong, the euphemisms in (25), (26), (27), and (28) are all too vivid in their comparisons. They call attention to the products that hold a taboo as strong as the menstruation taboo.
In (26), there is a comparison between the shape of the sanitary pads used to line underwear for protection and the shape of a saddle. The ‘cotton’ in ‘cotton pony’ refers to the use of cotton in sanitary pads, making them essentially cotton saddles. Example (27) refers to the use of tampons as sanitary protection. This euphemism points out that tampons basically “plug” the vagina in order to deal with menstrual discharge. In (28), there is a similar implication to that made in (17) involving the idea of a woman being “closed” off. This too has an association with sexual unavailability, which is the source of its dysphemistic nature.

Antipathy

Just as Akan had the negative view of the menstruation taboo and Kannada associated menstruation with pollution, English also employs negative euphemisms for menstruation. This theme is closely connected with the theme of indisposition because it is that indisposition and discomfort that leads to negative feelings about menstruation. Quite a few women see menstruation as a nuisance. Every month for a week, women have to endure cramps (with varying degrees of pain), possible cravings and keep up with sanitary protection. It’s not seen as fun and women are often very focused on the negative aspects of menstruation. This yields euphemisms such as those listed below:

(29) the drip

(30) the pain

Both of these euphemisms are considered to be dysphemistic euphemisms. The first, in (29), refers to the flow of menstrual discharge. It can be seen as a comparison between the annoyance of menstruating and a constant drip of a leaky faucet. This euphemism is also rather
graphic in the sense that it evokes the thought of menstrual flow. It has a natural discomfort associated with it and is therefore dysphemistic. It can also be considered to impose the image of someone constantly dripping, emphasizing the uncleanliness of menstruation.

As for the euphemism in (30), ‘the pain’ can have a double meaning. This can be a reference to actual physical pain felt during menstruation. In this case, it would maintain its status as a euphemism within the context of people who are very familiar with one another. Outside of this context, it may not be very clear what the speaker is referring to. This is too indirect of a euphemism and allows for different interpretations.

Close-knit groups of people tend to be more candid with one another and use more graphic or dysphemistic language. This is true for my own circles of friends and family. We tend to be much more vulgar with the people we are most comfortable with and as I talked with my friends about their use of euphemisms, I noticed that some of them felt more comfortable alluding to their menstruation with more dysphemistic expressions.

(31) my uterus hates me so much it cries tears of blood

The expression in (31) is clearly dysphemistic. The use of the word, ‘uterus’, is a reference to the location of menstrual cramping. Similarly, the personification of the uterus as ‘crying’ implies pain. The ‘tears of blood’ refer to the menstrual discharge. I included this expression under this theme due to its obvious connections with pain and negative feelings about menstruation. This is also a representation of the exaggerated language used to address menstruation within more intimate groups of people. There are other forms used such as ‘I feel like my uterus is punching me’.

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These expressions are considered to be euphemistic amongst private groups of people who are comfortable with one another. Outside of this group, however, these are extremely dysphemistic and often inappropriate. One would never use the expression in (31) in a workplace or with an acquaintance. It should also be noted that this expression and its variants that I have pointed out are used among younger generation women. The only time I have encountered these dysphemistic euphemisms is within the context of a conversation between my close friends. I found it curious that the two women who used these expressions were more uncomfortable using the word ‘menstruation’ than they were when referring to the same thing with more graphic detail. This is a perfect example of how the X-phemisms are part of a spectrum, upon which a phrase or expression’s place depends on context.

Periodicity

Some of the most commonly used euphemisms for menstruation come from the periodicity theme. Menstruation is reoccurring but generally only lasts for short periods of time. The Latin word mensis (menses plural), ‘month’, is the source for the use of the word ‘menses’ in medical terminology (Allan and Burridge 1991; 82). Typically, menstruation happens once a month so it’s not surprising that there is a connection between the word for ‘month’ and menstruation. From this we have many variations of these euphemisms:

(32) the monthlies
(33) monthly flowering
(34) that time of the month
The example in (32) is obvious in its meaning. This calls attention to the fact that menstruation is a monthly event. Most people who know anything about menstruation would know this fact, making this euphemism easy to use in most if not all contexts. I included the euphemism in (33) because of the use of the word ‘flowering’. I have heard the word “flower” used in reference to girls coming of age so often that I felt it was worth mentioning. The most basic metaphor for fertility has been the blooming of flowers, which is a sign of fruitfulness. Menstruation is the sign that a woman’s body has reached the point of fertility; in essence, it has ‘flowered’. I have only heard it in reference to first menstruation and most of the women I have collected euphemisms from reported that they rarely hear this. There is also an equally dated variant of this euphemism that utilizes the red color reference: ‘red flower’. The combination of the color reference and the flower metaphor provide for a clear interpretation despite how dated the euphemism is. The euphemism in (33) is not used quite as often as (32) or (34) but it’s significant in that it is one of the older phrases used for menstruation. It is also used cross-culturally, as exhibited by the Akan euphemisms.

I have heard the example in (34) more often than any of the euphemisms I have listed throughout this section. It is probably one of the most common and most safe ways to refer to menstruation. I have used it and heard it used in many different contexts and have only heard it in a couple of dysphemistic contexts. ‘That time of the month’ is a very direct way of conveying the message that someone is menstruating without invoking uncomfortable visuals or associations. Most people have at least a vague understanding of what is being referred to, even if they have not been exposed to the topic of menstruation very often.
Although there are only a few contexts in which (34) would be considered dysphemistic, this euphemism is used in such contexts rather often. Many of the women I have talked to have revealed that when some men say things like: “It must be that time of the month.” or “Is it that time of the month?” it is often meant as an insult or they feel insulted. These examples are usually in response to a perceived negative disposition from the female being referred to. I have heard things such as: “You’re moody; it must be that time of the month”. This connects to the American society’s continuing problems with sexism. Some of the beliefs that women are inferior stem from the idea that they are overly emotional. By offering up these euphemisms as the reasoning behind the referent’s disposition or “moodiness”, the speaker imposes negative views of women upon the listener. By violating the “don’t impose” maxim, this euphemism becomes a dysphemism in these contexts. This seems to be one of the more clear examples of a very euphemistic expression turning into a dysphemistic expression within different contexts.

The final, and possibly most widely used, euphemism in this theme is:

(35) period

This euphemism is the default that most people, both women and men, use to refer to menstruation. It merely refers to the period in time during which a woman is menstruating. Variants of this are often used: ‘she’s on her period’ or ‘she got her period’. This euphemism is used so often as the preferred speech that it has almost become an orthophemism, in that is seems more direct than using ‘menstruation’. This is mostly because people rarely use

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‘menstruation’ and instead opt to use ‘period’. Its frequent use has made it seem more direct because it very rarely needs an explanation. Most people know what is being referred to when it is used while ‘menstruation’ often causes people to pause.

As I’ve asked the people around me about their use of euphemisms for menstruation, I have found myself having to explain what menstruation actually is. As soon as I say ‘period’, there is sudden recognition on the faces of my audience. This made me start thinking about whether ‘menstruation’ has maintained its status as an orthophemism or whether it has be pushed into the spectrum of dysphemism. For myself, I realized that it has become much more dysphemistic. Before I started research for this project, I found the word to be extremely uncomfortable in its clinical nature. Words of a clinical nature are likely to be associated with hospitals and disease. Many of the people I’ve talked to about this topic have agreed that they would never use ‘menstruation’ which makes me wonder where it would lie on the spectrum of x-phemisms.

Final Thoughts

In covering the taboo of menstruation and its linguistic representations, I have pinpointed the main themes that seem to be present cross-culturally. There is the theme of pollution versus purity, which was very prevalent in the Kannada data. It also made its appearance in the Akan with the seclusion euphemisms. The practice of excluding menstruating women is one that was upheld by a number of societies and the remnants of it are seen in the euphemisms that resulted. The euphemisms that alluded to the additional taboo of women cooking for adult males can also be seen as a representation of the pollution theme.
Within the Akan language, there was also the theme of indisposition, which was shared in English. This can even be seen as a theme in Kannada. The nature of the overarching pollution theme alludes to a type of indisposition. In the Kannada language, those who are seen as polluted or dirty must be avoided and this can translate to a type of social indisposition. They are unable to interact fully with others in the community and therefore are indisposed. The English euphemisms under the indisposition theme, however, were much more focused on physical indisposition. They directly referenced the symptoms of menstruation that lead to physical indisposition as well as used metaphors for indirect reference. Despite the differences in language and culture, these three languages share many of the themes for menstruation taboos.

Still, there is much more of a connection between Akan and English in the amount of themes that are mutually identifiable. They both have euphemisms that fall under the themes of fertility. The English euphemisms that incorporate ‘flowering’ seemed to be less frequently used but still come up when people address the topic of first menstruation. In Akan, euphemisms that refer to ‘flowering’ are also used for the first menstruation. Yet, the Akan data is much older than my data from English and I would be interested to see if the ‘flowering’ euphemisms have become less frequently used in recent years.

In addition to the theme of fertility and indisposition, they both share euphemisms that have strong references to sexual activity. While the Akan language has euphemisms that are meant to specifically address the additional taboo of engaging in sex during menstruation, they are indirect and can be interpreted in many different ways. The Akan euphemisms have a
strong emphasis on context that they are situation specific. English euphemisms that reference sexual activity work similarly, but they are not designated as only appropriate for the context of sexual partner to sexual partner.

The final theme that I want to highlight is the visitor theme. Both English and Akan have a strong prevalence of visitor euphemisms for menstruation. Akan generally only employs male visitor metaphors. This is due to the fact that these euphemisms are mainly used to avoid sexual activity. For the Akan, the visitor is a protective male that is to rival the male sexual partner. In English, these euphemisms may use male names in an assumption that visitors to a woman’s vagina would be male.

In tandem with my focus on the themes that cross cultures, I’ve applied the face theory and linguistic politeness to the use of menstruation euphemisms. By paying attention the Gricean conversational maxims and their place in linguistic politeness, I was able to utilize Watt’s combination of the theory of linguistic politeness and the face theory. These theories helped in determining how euphemisms and dysphemisms fluctuate along the X-phemism spectrum depending on situation and context. Furthermore, the replacement of the orthophemistic term, ‘menstruation’, with the euphemistic term, ‘period’, may suggest that x-phemisms are on a continuum. As certain contexts allow for dysphemisms to replace euphemisms and euphemisms to replace orthophemisms, it may be assumed that orthophemisms would take the place of dysphemisms. This suggests a cycle rather than a spectrum and I am curious to continue further research into x-phemisms for more clarification.
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