

The Importance of euphemism as an indirect communication mechanism for Politeness in Kabyle Discourse

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Abstract: This article provides a systematic analysis of euphemistic expressions in Kabyle discourse, aiming to show how euphemism functions not only as a politeness strategy but also as a vital mechanism for sustaining social cohesion and community bonds. Drawing on 15 contextualised euphemisms, the study applies Watts et al.'s (1992) Discursive Approach to Politeness to examine how Kabyle interlocutors negotiate politeness in everyday interaction when addressing sensitive or taboo topics. The findings have shown that Kabyle speakers employ euphemism to manage social sensitivity and align with cultural norms, particularly in discussions of bodily functions, reproduction, physical appearance, and marriage. Because politeness is negotiated in discourse, euphemisms emerge as reflections of values embedded in Kabyle society, showing how speakers balance respect with communicative needs. The study hence makes significant contributions to cultural studies, pragmatic study of euphemism as well as communication studies, more generally.

Keywords: Euphemism, indirect communication, Kabyle language, politeness, cultural values..

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1. INTRODUCTION

"A language without euphemisms would be a defective instrument of communication" (Burchfield 1985: 29).

Euphemism is a well-known and widely used linguistic mechanism which, according to the pioneering socio-psychological study of Keith Allan and Kate Burridge (1991), serves to either avoid or confront taboo subjects. It is consciously used in situations where speakers are aware of some communicative tension when conveying a message to recipients. Euphemism can be defined, in a general sense, as the replacement of inappropriate words by more appropriate ones for reasons such as religious fear, moral scruples, or politeness (Gómez, 2009). Accordingly, speakers choose their words appropriately, instead of just uttering whatever crosses their minds.

The origins of euphemism date back to mid-17th century Greece, where the word emerged from the Greek root word *euphēmismos* with the prefix *eu-* meaning "good" or "well" and the suffix *phēmē* meaning "speech". Ancient Greeks used euphemism as a stylistic trope to mitigate obscene or offensive language. Euphemistic substitutes were used in sanctuaries during religious ceremonies, where the use of certain terms was prohibited. This is echoed by Zumthor (1952: 177) who stated that:

"[Euphemism] relates to sacred vocabulary. It refers in principle to the use of auspicious expressions ... [and] the exclusion of all harmful expressions within a sanctuary [...]. It is closely linked to certain subjects: principally the supernatural, sexual life, death, illness, and social defects".

Despite its religious origins, euphemism has evolved and spread to other fields, such as psychology and social sciences. It has aroused great interest among researchers worldwide, who have sought to study this phenomenon from various approaches, particularly pragmatic,

sociological, and psychological, to determine the reasons and purposes of using euphemism across various discourses. Examples of such discourses include political discourse (e.g., Crespo-Fernández, 2018; Mironina and Porchesku, 2023), media discourse (e.g., Hojati, 2012), medical discourse (e.g., Herbert, 2016), and economic discourse (Malyuga and Orlova, 2018).

Euphemisms can be found in most of the world's languages, as Miller (2000) has pointed out that given the existence of concepts deemed too offensive to speak about in almost all the world's languages, there exists a need for speakers of different languages to find roundabout, indirect, and socially acceptable ways of referring to such concepts. Indeed, there has been a growing interest in the study of euphemism across languages. There is a substantial body of literature on euphemisms in Arabic; for example, Al-Azzam et al. (2022) have examined the use of euphemism for politeness in Jordanian Arabic. Ould Mohamed Baba (2021) provided real-life examples for a general overview of the types of euphemisms used in Standard Classical Arabic as well as across Arabic dialects. The interest in the study of euphemism has extended to Algerian Arabic, as researchers have examined the use of euphemism among different age groups in Algerian society (e.g., Ghounane, 2014; Drissi, 2020; Arabet, 2021) and have highlighted its importance in social interactions and identified the most tabooed topics that are handled with care in Algeria.

However, not much scholarly ink has been spilled over the use of euphemism in Kabyle. The only academic research existing on this topic is the one conducted by Chaker (1997), which provides a limited number of euphemisms found in Berber languages, specifically Kabyle¹ and Tachelhit.² Therefore, the present article is an attempt to provide a systematic analysis of a set of commonly used euphemisms by Kabyle speakers in Algeria. It aims to enrich the Kabyle or Amazigh dictionary with a sample of euphemistic words and expressions that the dictionary desperately lacks and urgently needs. To my knowledge, no

existing Kabyle dictionary contains this type of stylistic device, even the most comprehensive dictionary by Jean-Marie Dallet (1982), which cost its author more than ten years of work.

2- Research Objectives:

The motivation behind undertaking this study was a situation which I witnessed a few years ago at the Paediatrics ward of Nedir Mohamed Hospital in Tizi-Ouzou:

A lady arrived at the ward accompanied by her elderly mother-in-law, dressed in traditional Kabyle attire. A doctor on duty called out and welcomed the lady in the waiting room and, while showing her the way into the consultation room, he remarked:

"It seems like your baby has urinated (*"ivec"* in Kabyle) and you haven't found a place to change his diaper; it stinks".

Even before the lady could answer, the mother-in-law beat her to it, replying to the doctor:

"Respect yourself, Doctor!"

Looking shocked/surprised by the answer, the doctor asked the ladies: "Why, what's wrong?"

The mother-in-law replied: "Like any self-respecting Kabyle person, you should have said: the baby had his liver waters (*"igar aman n tasa"* instead of *"ivec"*)".

The doctor answered back: "As far as I know, the liver doesn't produce urine!"

The mother-in-law angrily warned the doctor: "For the last time, respect yourself!"

The incident nearly escalated, but the intervention of the many people in the waiting room helped defuse the situation. This case highlights how the doctor relied on explicit medical knowledge to assert his point, whereas the old lady and her daughter-in-law evaluated the subject matter and situation through the lens of morality and social conventions. They showed respect by choosing the euphemism *"igar aman n tasa"* rather than the blunter verb *"ivec"* to refer to urination.

This exchange demonstrates that euphemisms in Kabyle discourse are not merely stylistic choices but essential markers of respect and cultural propriety, underscoring the need for

systematic study of their role in politeness strategies. The situation reveals a tension between professional medical discourse and cultural social discourse: the doctor's literalism is perceived as disrespectful, while the mother-in-law's insistence on euphemism reflects a deeply rooted cultural norm of politeness. Her reaction illustrates how euphemisms function as linguistic alternatives and moral and social imperatives within Kabyle society.

This incident prompted deeper reflection on the various types, reasons, and contexts of deploying euphemisms among Kabyle speakers. Compiling such an inventory is an extensive and complex undertaking, requiring collaborative efforts of multiple researchers, major research institutions including the recently established Amazigh Academy. Given the dynamic and ever-evolving nature of language, identifying all euphemisms used in Kabyle is a challenging and time-consuming task. Furthermore, euphemisms are often embedded in people's memories and resurface only in appropriate situations: the right use at the right time. Consequently, this article provides a detailed discussion of a curated selection of euphemisms that Kabyle-speaking participants from Tizi-Ouzou use to express politeness in social contexts. This article is the first systematic study of euphemism as a politeness strategy in Kabyle verbal discourse. By situating euphemism within the cultural fabric of Kabyle society represented by the study participants, the article goes beyond describing the linguistic function of euphemism to highlighting its broader social and cultural significance. It aims to offer insights into how euphemism functions beyond mere linguistic choices, serving instead as a crucial mechanism for sustaining collective cultural identity and social cohesion. In doing so, the article underscores the broader role of language in shaping community bonds. I will draw on euphemistic words and expressions contextualised through concrete examples of spoken Kabyle sentences to illustrate the role of euphemisms in addressing taboo topics, such as urination, in Kabyle discourse.

3-Literature Review:

3.1 Direct versus Indirect Communication

Communication styles exist along a continuum from direct to indirect, with significant implications for intercultural and cross-cultural interactions as well as pragmatic effectiveness. Direct communication, characterised by explicit language use and literal interpretation, prioritises clarity and precision. As Joyce (2012) observes, direct communicators “tend to say what they think” with their message conveyed primarily through the explicit meaning of their words. This approach values straightforwardness and assumes that effective communication relies on precise verbal expression.

In contrast, indirect communication relies on contextual cues, shared understanding, and paralinguistic or nonverbal elements to convey meaning beyond the literal interpretation of words. According to Tannen (1994: 79), “indirectness is a fundamental element in human communication”, albeit “one that varies the most from one culture to another, and one that can cause confusion and misunderstanding”. In such contexts, meaning emerges not just from words themselves but from “pauses, silence, tone of voice” (Ting-Toomey, 1999: 100), as well as cultural knowledge and social expectations. In these communicative environments, responsibility shifts to the listener, whose “sensitivity and ability to capture the under-the-surface meaning and to discern implicit meaning becomes critical” (Yum, 1988: 385).

The clash between direct and indirect communicative expectations can create significant challenges. As Tannen (1994: 99–100) points out, “those who expect indirectness will be offended by talk in any other mode”, perceiving direct communicators as rude or socially inappropriate. Meanwhile, direct communicators often miss the nuances and subtleties (Ting-Toomey, 1999: 101) inherent in indirect communication, leading to frustration and confusion. This communicative disconnect can undermine interpersonal relationships and

professional effectiveness. As a prevalent and culturally significant form of indirect communication, euphemism serves as a linguistic strategy that substitutes potentially offensive or sensitive terms with inoffensive expressions. It demonstrates how indirectness fulfils social and pragmatic functions, as detailed in the in the following section.

3.2 Uses of Euphemism

Euphemism is an essential component of human language, serving two principal functions in communication: social and political. The social function of euphemism focuses on politeness and the maintenance of interpersonal relationships. In social contexts, euphemistic language acts as a protective linguistic shield, sparing both speakers and listeners from potential embarrassment or discomfort when discussing taboo or sensitive topics such as death, religion, sexuality, illness, and physical appearance (Linfoot-Ham, 2005: 228). For example, using “passed away” instead of “died” illustrates how euphemisms smooth social interactions by maintaining dignity and avoiding offence. As Malyunga and Orlova (2018: 136) note, euphemisms are important “to mitigate a rude utterance, to disguise words bearing a negative connotation”. They often arise from cultural taboos and shared norms of propriety, functioning as markers of cultural identity and social awareness. These socially-motivated euphemisms reflect cultural values and maintain community standards of politeness and respect, demonstrating how language accommodates deeply held social sensitivities while enabling communication about sensitive topics.

The political function of euphemism, by contrast, operates as a strategic linguistic device with significant implications for public discourse and accountability. Crespo-Fernández (2014: 6) explains that politicians use euphemistic language to address sensitive topics and criticise opponents while maintaining an image of political correctness. By reframing controversial policies, military actions, or social inequalities in more palatable terms (Mayfield, 2009: 270), political euphemisms shape alternative perceptions of reality and safeguard public figures

from negative audience perceptions. A notable example is President Ronald Reagan's description of a military operation as "a rescue mission" rather than an "invasion" (Deng and Liu, 1989: 89). Expressions like "collateral damage" shield politicians from accountability for the human costs of military actions, highlighting euphemisms' dual role as social lubricants and mechanisms for shaping public opinion and deflecting responsibility. This political dimension underscores euphemism's potential as a tool of power, capable of facilitating diplomatic communication while obscuring uncomfortable truths.

3.3 Euphemism and Politeness

Verbal politeness is widely understood as the relationship between specific linguistic units (words and expressions) in interpersonal communication and established norms of social behaviour (Fraser, 1990; Held, 1992). Within this framework, euphemism is deeply intertwined with expected politeness conventions, reflecting humans' tendency to use subtle language when addressing taboo or potentially offensive concepts (Al-Kharabsheh 2011, 20). Indeed, euphemisms operate primarily on taboos that speakers attempt to soften or obscure—such as death, scatology, and sex—which have long been euphemised, as documented in numerous studies (e.g., Allan and Burridge 1991).

From a pragmatic perspective, euphemism operates as "a linguistic politeness strategy," replacing offensive expressions with less direct alternatives that carry more positive connotations (Farghal 2005, 57). For instance, an Arabic speaker might use the euphemistic expression "lam yuḥalifu-hu-l ḥaḍ" (he had bad luck) in place of the more direct "fašila" (he failed) when discussing someone's lack of success—illustrating euphemism's cross-cultural role in preserving social harmony.

As a conversational strategy, verbal politeness is a cornerstone for analysing language as a social phenomenon. Pragmatics scholar Geoffrey Leech (1983: 131–139) categorised the Politeness Principle into six maxims: Tact, Generosity, Approbation, Modesty, Agreement,

and Sympathy, emphasising the Tact Maxim as “the most important kind of politeness” (p. 107). Euphemisms act as markers of politeness within theoretical approaches that prioritise indirectness as an ideal strategy for conflict or offense mitigation. By strategically employing euphemisms, speakers can reduce or circumvent the risks of triggering conflict or offense in specific communicative contexts. Using euphemisms for politeness is an intentional process that considers various contextual factors, including the social relationship between interlocutors, the level of context formality, and the appropriate register. In formal communication contexts, social factors influence verbal exchanges, with tact and respect leading to more frequent euphemistic substitutions (Crespo-Fernández, 2005).

From this perspective, euphemism and politeness are mutually dependent phenomena: the need for politeness shapes euphemistic usage, while the indirectness of euphemisms helps prevent offense and maintain polite interactions. This reciprocal relationship underscores the social foundation of euphemistic language and its crucial role in fostering harmonious communication.

3.4 The Cultural Foundations of Politeness and Euphemism in Kabyle Discourse

In Kabylie, social norms are grounded in modesty (*leḥya*) and a strict code of honor (*lḥerma*). These values underpin rules of politeness, shaping both individual conduct and interpersonal relations. Because Kabyle society has long relied on oral tradition, politeness is most visibly expressed through language. Speech is regarded as a double-edged sword, capable of both benefit and harm. Public discourse is therefore subject to strict regulation, with words expected to be weighed (*awal iweznen*), carefully considered, and never uttered hastily, in accordance with norms of restraint and indirectness (Abrous, 2015). Politeness in language (*leḥdaqa*) is expected of all members of society. It is intertwined with respect and integrates Islamic values, with everyday practices such as warm greetings and invocations of God (e.g., *Rebbi ad iċin*) reinforcing ideals of hospitality and

social cohesion.

From an early age, children are socialised into norms of politeness through greetings, respectful address toward elders, and verbal restraint, with proverbs reinforcing these principles across generations (see Hocine et al., 2025). The fundamental precept instilled is modesty, which Dallet (1982: 349) describes through the verb *sedḥi* (“to have respect for”). This relational reserve regulates social distance between men and women, across age groups, and within families, particularly between children and parents or juniors and seniors. The tacit code of propriety applies to all, though it is enforced with greater rigour for women.

In Kabyle culture, politeness also shapes linguistic practice by discouraging directness, which is often perceived as face-threatening or offensive. As Searle (1972: 64) observes, “the principal motivation in favour of indirectness is politeness”. Topics considered indecent or inappropriate are avoided or addressed indirectly through euphemisms and cautious phrasing. For example, when speaking of a woman who has given birth, people say *terba-d* (she carries in her lap), while the verb *arew* (“to give birth”) is commonly reserved for female animals, though sometimes used by women among themselves (Abrous, 2015). Thus, politeness and respect function not only as moral imperatives but also as culturally sanctioned linguistic strategies. Euphemisms, particularly, serve as tools that enable speakers to navigate taboos while maintaining modesty, respect, and social harmony.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on the Discursive Approach to Politeness (Watts et al. 1992; Watts 2003, 2005) to explain the recourse to euphemistic language in interactions within the same cultural group, specifically Kabyle speakers. A cornerstone of this approach is the argument that politeness is not a fixed set of rules but negotiated in interaction, where what counts as polite or euphemistic depends on shared cultural norms and contextual expectations. Because politeness is negotiated, euphemisms become reflections of values embedded in

Kabyle society.

Within this framework, euphemistic expressions can be understood as instances of “salient or marked” politeness (Locher & Watts, 2005: 17), since they go beyond the politeness expectations of interaction—defined as “linguistic behaviour which is perceived to be appropriate to the social constraints of the ongoing interaction” (Watts 2003: 19)—to mitigate potential embarrassment and maintain social harmony. This approach can help us analyse euphemisms as indirect forms of politeness that often arise to avoid reference to socially sensitive or taboo topics, and as practices that signal belonging and alignment with community expectations. Thus, the discursive approach provides a valuable lens for exploring the cultural foundations of euphemisms and their role in sustaining politeness among Kabyle speakers, showing that euphemisms are not just linguistic substitutions but socially meaningful practices.

5. Methodology and Corpus

The corpus for this study was constructed from two complementary sources: a published lexical reference work and naturally occurring speech collected through informal participant observation. The first source is Hocine Toumi’s *AWAL S WAWAL: Recueil de locutions et d’expressions en Kabyle* (2008), a dictionary-style compilation that provides both the denotative meanings of Kabyle words and expressions and their connotative nuances and potential uses in social interaction, including their function as euphemisms. This resource served as an initial inventory from which culturally salient euphemistic forms were identified. To ensure that the analysis reflects contemporary usage rather than relying solely on a lexical compilation, additional data were gathered from spontaneous conversations in the city of Tizi Ouzou. These interactions occurred in everyday settings, such as family gatherings, public spaces, and informal discussions with acquaintances. The speakers involved were adults between the ages of 35 and 85, all of whom are native Kabyle speakers residing in the

area. Although the conversations were not audio-recorded, detailed field notes were taken immediately afterwards to document the expressions used, the situational context, and the demographic characteristics of the interlocutors.

The article uses a qualitative content analysis, which Hsieh and Shannon (2005: 1278) define as “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns”. The scholars add that “research using qualitative content analysis focuses on the characteristics of language as communication with attention to the content or contextual meaning of the text” data, which might be in verbal, print, or electronic form and might have been “obtained from narrative responses, open-ended survey questions, interviews, focus groups, observations, or print media such as articles, books, or manuals” (ibid.,).

In terms of analytical process, the researcher read data from both sources repeatedly to identify both literal and euphemistic meanings, as well as recurring and similar or contrasting patterns of euphemism use. As Table 1 shows, the euphemistic words and expressions are presented within contextualised sentences to illustrate their practical usage by Kabyle speakers. In the final stage of the analysis, the euphemisms were grouped into six broader themes, which consistently reflected culturally sensitive domains in Kabyle interaction. These categories are discussed in detail in Section 6.

Although modest in size, the dataset offers significant insights into the use of euphemism for politeness and respect in Kabyle discourse. This is consistent the principle that qualitative research prioritises analytical depth and contextual understanding over numerical breadth (Clark et al., 2021: 524). The combination of a structured lexical reference and naturally occurring verbal discourse provides a balanced foundation for examining euphemistic practices. The article aims to provide an exploratory yet culturally grounded sample of euphemistic practices rather than an exhaustive inventory, with themes selected because

they consistently emerged as culturally sensitive domains in Kabyle interaction. These reflect long-standing social taboos and norms surrounding propriety, modesty, and interpersonal respect.

Table 1: Set of euphemisms in Kabyle selected for the article

N°	Euphemism in Kabyle	Intended meaning in Kabyle	Example in Kabyle
1	Sired	Xru;vec	Arğuyicitah, ad ruħaYadsirdaYsisyenaandukelYersuq
2	Idmaren	Tibucin;tizizatin	TÈeṭtelurtesÈeddayaradiu n yidmaren, yellacek belli tuđenyeraṭanni
3	LeÈfunga	Izan	yumsedleÈfunga, ihiiruħ ad icucef
4	Lmarkub; bu imezuYen	Ayyul	Ur tugadetara, awendredleYlmarkub-iw ad neqlemiyisticekarin n uzemmurnwen
5	SÈuaksum	Tqubba;tcuf	Ur cikeYaraatexdemadaldeg uYervaz, taqcictakitasÈaaṭas n ukessum
6	Amekitiduriwyemma-s	Èeryan	MugreYdyiwen n udarwicyellaamakenitiduriwyemma-s
7	Axxam;iÈeggalen; tawacult	Tameṭṭut-iw	Ur keznuzuYaratakarustagi, almiciwraYaxxam-iw
8	Aman n tasa	Ivecan	Veddel-as ilufanagi, igeraman n tasa
9	Lexs	Vec	NekkiniṭzalaY, urtsatafaYaraaqcicagiimiyellaxs
10	Azel a taÈebbuṭ	SÈuavariḍ	Ur cikaYara ad ruħaYyerlxudmaituzeltaÈebbuṭ-iw
11	TaÈebbuṭ d asif	SÈuavariḍ	TaÈebbuṭ-is d asif, muqelkan ma yesÈatawlamulac at nawitura s amejjay
12	taṣeṭṭa	Taraṭiwt	Izirdiitwasen s taṣeṭṭainestaYezfat
13	sebbev	leqqeħ	Jeddiyebbitafunastniwaken ad sebbev
14	araxxam	zwağ	vYiYadaraYaxxamayi, lamaÈnaugadeYadaYliYakkedyiwetunetqadararalwaldin
15	Bit raħa; bit lma	/	AruğyiadruħaYar bit raħa, syen aneffeYarvara

Table 2: Set of euphemisms translated to English selected for the article

N°	Literal meaning in English	Translated meaning in English	Translation in English
1	To wash oneself	to defecate; to urinate	Wait for me a bit; I'm going to wash up, then we'll go to the market together
2	Chest	breast ; udders	She delayed getting a chest X-ray; it's possible she may have that illness (implied reference to cancer)
3	Dirtiness	Excrement; faeces	He was soiled, so he went to shower
4	The mount ;the one with two ears	Donkey	Don't be afraid, I'll lend you my mount to carry your sacks of olives
5	To have flesh	Fat ; heavyset; big-bellied	I don't think she can do sports at school; this girl is big-bellied
6	As he was brought into the world by his mother	Naked	I met a mad person who looked as he was born by his mother
7	The house or the members of the family or the family	Spouse	I won't sell you this car until I ask my family's opinion
8	Water of the liver	Urine	Change this child's diaper; he has passed bile
9	To get wet	To urinate or to pee	I'm praying; I won't pick up this child because he is wet
10	To have a running stomach	To have diarrhea	I don't think I'll go to work since I have a running stomach
11	A river belly	To have acute diarrhea	His belly is like a river; check if he has a fever, otherwise let's take him to the doctor right away
12	A branch or sprig	Tail	A fox is known for its long branch
13	To cause	To fertilise	My grandfather took the cow to have it fertilised
14	To build a house	To get married	I want to build a house, Mom, but I'm afraid of ending up with someone who doesn't respect parents
15	Restroom ; washroom	Toilets/WC	Wait for me to go into the restroom, then we'll head outside

6. Results and Discussion

The analysis of euphemisms employed by Kabyle speakers has revealed six thematic categories, discussed below. Interpreted through Watts et al. (1992) discursive approach to politeness, these euphemistic words and expressions exemplify salient or marked politeness, as they mitigate embarrassment and align with community expectations. The euphemisms, examined in their context of use, have shown that politeness is actively negotiated among Kabyle speakers, reflecting shared cultural norms of restraint and indirectness (see Section 3.4). Consistent with Leech's (1983) Tact Principle, the speakers avoided blunt or potentially offensive words and opted instead for tactful alternatives to preserve social harmony.

Category 1: Human body and bodily functions

One of the taboo topics that participants refrained from addressing directly in interpersonal communication is intimate body parts, in order to adhere to acceptable social and cultural norms. As Spolsky (1998: 19–20) notes, politeness is best understood as demonstrating good manners or etiquette. Since politeness is culturally defined, behaviours considered polite in one culture may be seen as rude or strange in another. This cultural specificity is particularly clear in how Kabyle speakers approach discussions about intimate body parts. For example, the term "idmaren" (chest) is a commonly used euphemism for breast in Kabyle, as the bluntness of the term "tizizatin" is considered embarrassing, especially in a society governed by principles of modesty and mutual respect. If a speaker were to say "Tɛɛtɛtɛl ur tesɛedda yara radiu n tizizatin" (She delayed getting a breast X-ray) instead of "Tɛɛtɛtɛl ur tesɛedda yara radiu n yidmaren" (She delayed getting a chest X-ray), the listener may perceive the utterance as disrespectful and think that the speaker did not comply with the region's social and cultural norms. As Jdetawy (2019: 30840) observes, "ignoring the values of and the elements of the culture while communicating will serve assault between the speaker and the listener, and hence the communication process will seem strange".

The analysis revealed that bodily functions constitute another area where euphemisms are employed. For instance, urination and defecation are softened using the term *sired* (“to wash oneself”) in Example 1. This implies that these biological processes are linked to cleanliness, presenting them in a positive light. Another euphemism used for urination is *lexs* in Example 9, suggesting that the individual becomes wet as a result of releasing urine. As Lerner (2010:155) remarks, despite being natural processes, bodily functions often provoke embarrassment, distaste, and shame. This cultural sensitivity is consistent with Bourdieu’s (2000) observation³ that the code of honour in Kabyle society imposes complete reserve on everything that pertains to intimacy, including the body, its organic functions, and even the expression of personal feelings, which explains why euphemisms surrounding bodily functions are culturally necessary in Kabyle discourse.

Medical terms for bodily excrements—urine and faeces—were also subject to euphemisms. Instead of using the direct terms “*ivecan*” (urine) and “*iḥan*” (faeces), speakers opted for milder expressions, such as “*amen n tasa*”(liver water) in Example 8 and “*leḥfunga*”(dirtiness) in Example 3. These euphemistic terms are widely accepted in Kabyle society, allowing speakers to discuss bodily functions without creating discomfort in their conversations. This reinforces Locher and Watts (2005: 12) assertion that politeness is a key factor driving euphemistic language choices.

The condition of having diarrhea is euphemised through the figurative expressions “*azel n taḥebbuṭ*” (a running stomach) in Example 10 and “*taḥebbuṭ d asif*” (a river belly) in Example 11. While a stomach cannot physically run or resemble a river, these metaphoric descriptions help speakers determine the severity of their diarrhea, whether mild or acute. In both expressions, Kabyle speakers deliberately refer to the body part, “*taḥebbuṭ*” (belly or stomach), rather than the unpleasant term “*avariḍ*” (diarrhea). This careful linguistic maneuvering demonstrates Spolsky's argument that politeness as the practical application of

etiquette, which in Kabyle culture includes avoiding direct references to bodily functions to prevent embarrassment in social interactions.

The final euphemism in this category highlights how Kabyle speakers approached the topic of reproduction with tact and cultural sensitivity. The term “sebbev” (to cause) is purposefully deployed in lieu of the more explicit “leqqeh” (to fertilise), as seen in the following sentence (Example 13):

“Jeddi yebbi tafunast ni iwaken ad sebbev”

(My grandfather took the cow to have it fertilised)

Due to the cultural sensitivities surrounding topics of sex and fertilisation in Kabyle society, the speakers avoided naming the medical procedure involved. Instead, they used an indirect reference, focusing on the veterinarian “causing” the cow’s pregnancy through in vitro fertilisation (IVF) for bovine reproduction. This euphemistic strategy deliberately shifts the focus away from the explicit act of fertilisation to the person facilitating the cow’s pregnancy. Such avoidance reflects broader cultural norms: Kabyle culture, strongly imbued with values of modesty and Islam, regards sexuality as a taboo subject that is widely avoided, and when it is mentioned, it is rarely addressed openly in either public or family contexts. Therefore, the euphemism “sebbev” enabled interlocutors to discuss the practice while maintaining politeness and tact.

Category 2: Physical appearance and imperfections

Kabyle speakers avoided naming others’ physical appearance or imperfections to prevent hurting the sensibilities of the individuals in question. As reflected in the data, they preferred the euphemistic phrase “SËu aksum” (to have flesh) to describe a fat person, such as in Example 5, rather than using the more direct terms “tqubba” (to be fat) or “tcuf” (to bulge), as the euphemism is considered more respectful in social contexts.

The analysis also showed that Kabyle speakers hold strong taboos regarding nakedness, as

they refrained from using the term “*Ǝeryan*” (nude or naked) in conversations. Instead, they used the euphemism “*Amek itiduriw yemma-s*” (as he was brought into the world by his mother), as illustrated in Example 6: “*MugreƳd yiwen n udarwic yella amaken itiduriw yemma-s*”. In this utterance, the speaker recounted coming across a naked, mentally unstable individual, drawing on the listener’s shared knowledge that newborns come to the world unclothed. By making this assumption, the speaker expected the listener to grasp the intended meaning concealed within the euphemism. This practice reflects Yacine’s (2019) argument that in the Berber and Kabyle tradition in particular, the human body is a “red line” in Kabyle discourse, not addressed openly but instead veiled through extreme reserve.

Category 3: Animals and their organs

The names of certain animals are considered disrespectful in Kabyle and are replaced with euphemisms to maintain politeness in conversations. For instance, Kabyle speakers excluded the term “*AƳyul*” (donkey) and chose more subtle names like “*lmarkub*” (mount), which conveys the idea of riding on the donkey’s back (Example 4). As Abrous (2015) notes, norms of politeness and respect towards others impose on Kabyle speakers to circumvent anything the society regards as inappropriate, dirty, or impure through euphemisms. Another euphemism found in the data is “*bu imezuƳen*” (the one with two ears), a reference to the donkey by means of its distinctive feature: its two ears.

The euphemistic reference to donkey is not unique to Kabyle speakers. Chaker (1997) has observed that “*lmarkub*” or “*amerkub*” are used across various Berber dialects. Another euphemism for donkey in these dialects is “*zzayla*” (beast of burden), which is also found in Algerian dialectal Arabic. This term refers to animals like donkeys or mules which are used for carrying loads or performing heavy labour. The word “*AƳyul*” is typically reserved for insults because the term has acquired a derogatory meaning in many languages, often describing someone as obstinate, stupid, or silly. Sacher (2012) explains in his collection of

curses and swear words from around the world that calling someone a donkey is a vile insult in Arabic and many East Asian cultures. He further notes that “although donkeys carry the implication of being thick-headed and stubborn, this insult goes beyond such characteristics, as Islamic tradition considers donkeys to be impure animals”. This cultural context might explain why Kabyle speakers refrain from using “Aḡyul” in interpersonal communication, opting instead for euphemisms to show respect and adhere to social conventions. For example, in a sentence like “Ur tugadet ara, awen dreqḏeḡ lmarkub-iw ad neqlem iyis ticekarin n uzemmur nwen” (Don’t be afraid, I’ll lend you my mount to carry your sacks of olives), using “Aḡyul” instead of “lmarkub” would likely offend the listener, creating embarrassment and potential tension.

The use of animal-related euphemisms is not limited to Kabyle speakers but is also common among speakers of various Arabic dialects in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region. Ould Mohammed Baba (2021: 1818) identifies that in Libyan Arabic, dangerous animals like snakes are euphemistically referred to as “habl” (rope) instead of “hnach” (snake).

Returning to the data, the term “taṣeṭṭa” (a branch or sprig) has been identified as an indirect reference to the tail of animals in Kabyle. The word “taraṭiwt” is considered too blunt and indecent for use in social contexts, and is thus replaced with “taṣeṭṭa” for politeness purposes, as shown in Example 12. This aligns with Leech’s (1975: 53) assertion that “[euphemism] consists of replacing a word which has offensive connotations with another expression, which makes no overt reference to the unpleasant side of the subject and may even be a positive misnomer”.

Category 4: Spouse

Another term that lends itself to euphemism in Kabyle is “wife” due to the sensitivity around this term in Kabyle culture and, more broadly, in Algerian culture given the conservative

nature of the country. Abrous (2015) states that the avoidance of mentioning a wife in public discourse is a culturally coded form of politeness, respect, and honour (lherma)⁴. In Kabyle society, there is a system of values that is built on oppositions between masculine/feminine and inside/outside. The inside (the feminine domain and private sphere) is marked as sacred. Because it is sacred, this domain is excluded from speech. The man's role is to defend this space, even at the risk of his life, which underscores its cultural importance (p.6324).

In light of this, the analysis showed that Kabyle speakers shun from the term "tameɛtut-iw" (my wife) in favour of tactful euphemisms such as "axxam" (home), "iɛeggalen" (family members), or "tawacult" (family). These strategic linguistic choices allow interlocutors to maintain a socially acceptable discourse when referring to a wife. This use of euphemisms reinforces the intricate relationship between language and social conventions, demonstrating how linguistic choices are shaped by "social structure, social environment, and values of the society" (Jdetawy, 2019: 30834). Accordingly, the social norms that govern Algerian society define the acceptable and unacceptable linguistic behaviour within its communities.

Category 5: Lavatory

The study has indicated that Kabyle speakers are far more comfortable naming the place where they relieve themselves, commonly known as washrooms, using euphemisms. According to the data presented in Table 1, "bit raḥa" (restroom) and "bit lma" (water room) are widely used as euphemisms for lavatory among the Kabyle speakers, despite the Arabic roots of these words. These softened terms are generally accepted and deemed more suitable in situations where speakers want to refer to facilities such as a bathroom—a term that, as Lerner (2010: 156) notes, is used "even though it has no bath"—or a restroom, which, as Lerner further explains, is so named "though one does not go there when tired".

The use of euphemisms for washrooms extends to other Arabic-speaking countries as well.

Oula Mohammed Baba (2021: 1818) has identified various terms for bathroom in Arabic, such as “al-adab” (politeness) in Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Additionally, countries such as Libya and Lebanon use expressions similar to those in Kabyle, owing to the Arabic origins of “bit raḥa” and “bit lma”. Through linguistic borrowing, these euphemisms have been adopted into Kabyle speech and are now widely used by Kabyle speakers who find it necessary to avoid breaching the norms of modesty and politeness that govern the society.

Category 6: Marriage

A sensitivity surrounding matrimony in Kabyle society has led speakers to adopt the euphemism “ar axxam” when referring to marriage, as illustrated in the following example:

“Vɣiɣ ad araɣ axxam ayi, lamaɛna ugadeɣ adaɣliɣ akked yiwet unetqadar ara lwaldin”

(I want to get married, but I'm afraid of ending up with someone who doesn't respect parents)

This example shows the sophisticated linguistic resources Kabyle speakers deploy when discussing personal relationships. The metaphorical expression “ar axxam” conveys the idea that marriage, much like building a house, represents establishing a foundation for future life and family. By using the euphemism “ar axxam” instead of the more direct term “zwaǧ” (marriage), the speaker negotiates politeness discursively, balancing personal expression with cultural expectations in line with Watts et al.'s (1992) view that politeness is an ongoing negotiation between interlocutors. This choice also reflects the speaker's awareness that discussing marriage openly may provoke feelings of shame or embarrassment in front of an interlocutor, making indirectness a culturally safer strategy. Additionally, this example reinforces Spolsky's assertion that politeness is culturally defined. It becomes clear that in Kabyle society, discussing marriage plans requires a certain level of indirectness and tact, particularly when addressing sensitive concerns like a prospective spouse's compatibility. For the speaker, this careful linguistic manoeuvring helps to sustain politeness and conform to the conservative social expectations.

7. Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that speakers use euphemism as a deliberate communicative strategy to observe modesty and avoid shame when addressing taboo topics in Kabyle discourse. By analysing authentic examples, I have shown how Kabyle speakers navigate discussions of intimate body parts, bodily functions, reproduction, marriage, and other culturally sensitive topics through euphemistic language which minimises potential offense and preserves social harmony, aligning with what Malyunga and Orlova (2018: 136) characterise as efforts “to mitigate a rude utterance, to disguise words bearing a negative connotation”. These linguistic choices reflect deeply ingrained cultural values around politeness and social appropriateness within the Kabyle community.

This study represents the first systematic attempt to document and analyse euphemism in Kabyle discourse. As such, the findings presented here should be regarded as preliminary and exploratory rather than definitive. Nevertheless, this paper contributes to two areas of study:

- Pragmatic euphemism research: by expanding the scope of inquiry beyond well-documented languages, such as Arabic, and showing how euphemism use for politeness purposes is negotiated in discourse
- Kabyle cultural studies: by revealing the socio-cultural significance of euphemism in serving as subtle mechanism for preserving traditional values and reinforcing collective identity

This paper paves the way for further academic studies to compile a larger corpus of euphemisms used in Kabyle. It also opens doors for deeper investigation into the pragmatics of euphemism. Documenting these euphemistic patterns may significantly facilitate the task of second-language learners of Kabyle, as euphemising represents a rich pragmatic resource whose absence would adversely affect communicative competence. As defined by Dell

Hymes (1972: 277), communicative competence encompasses not only grammatical knowledge but also the ability to use language appropriately in social contexts—a dimension in which euphemism plays a central role.

Finally, this article opens valuable avenues for future cross-cultural analyses of euphemism use within the broader context of Berber languages. The six thematic categories identified in this analysis could serve as a foundation for exploring other patterns across Berber dialects, such as Tachawit or the Mزاب dialects in Algeria. Extending this research to Berber languages outside Algeria, such as Tachelhit in Morocco, would provide comparative insights into how cultural norms and social values shape linguistic strategies across different Berber-speaking communities. Such endeavours could ultimately contribute to the ambitious goal of compiling an exhaustive set of euphemisms across all Berber languages, enriching our understanding of the intricate interplay between language, culture, and politeness.

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¹ Kabyle is a Berber dialect spoken in the northeast of Algeria, predominantly in the Kabylie region, which includes the cities of Tizi-Ouzou, Bouira, Béjaïa, and Boumerdes. Recognised as the country's second official language alongside Arabic, Kabyle boasts over 6 million speakers as of 2022.

² Tachelhit is a Berber dialect spoken in southwestern Morocco. Its speakers are known as Chleuh (Park and Boum, 2006: 434).

³ “L'intimité, c'est tout ce qui ressortit de la nature, c'est le corps et toutes les fonctions organiques, c'est le moi et ses sentiments ou ses affections [...]. Une pudeur extrême préside aussi à l'expression des sentiments, toujours extrêmement retenue et réservée et cela au sein même de la famille, entre le mari et la femme, entre les parents et les enfants” (Bourdieu, 2000: 52-53).

⁴ In her words: “Ce système de valeurs, bâti sur l'opposition/complémentarité entre le féminin et le masculin, le dedans et le dehors, délimite un espace interdit, considéré comme celui du sacré par excellence...Cet espace que l'homme doit défendre, si nécessaire au péril de sa vie, est soustrait au regard et exclu de la parole”(p.6324).