

The Euphemism treadmill in job termination language: A comparative study of Indonesian and Chinese

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Citation: Yuniarto, H. (2025). The Euphemism treadmill in job termination language: A comparative study of Indonesian and Chinese. *Notion: Journal of Linguistics, Literature, and Culture*, 7(1), 168-179. <https://doi.org/10.12928/notion.v7i1.11677>

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received: 02-10-2024

Accepted: 11-04-2025

Keywords:

Euphemism Treadmill

Job Termination Euphemism

Indonesian and Chinese

Linguistics

Cross-cultural Euphemism

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the euphemism treadmill phenomenon in job termination language within Indonesian and Chinese contexts. Employing Pinker's Euphemism Treadmill (2003) and Hofstede's cultural dimensions (2001), this study analyzes euphemistic expressions used in 3 Chinese economic news outlets (National Business Daily; China Business Network; The Economic Daily) and 3 Indonesian economic news outlets (CNBC Indonesia; Bisnis; Kontan) over 2019-2023. The data collection involved job termination keyword searches and manual screening of articles to compile a comprehensive corpus of job termination euphemisms, with native speakers reviewing and coding the data for accuracy. The analysis draws on a contrastive linguistic framework and cultural dimensions to interpret cultural factors influencing euphemism usage. Our findings reveal clear evidence of the euphemism treadmill effect in both languages, characterized by the continuous creation and replacement of euphemistic terms as they lose their mitigating power over time. Cultural values such as power distance, collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance manifest in euphemistic language practices in both languages. Results indicate that high power distance and collectivist orientations in both cultures contribute to the prevalence and evolution of job termination euphemisms. The research also explores how economic contexts, societal attitudes, and globalization influences shape the euphemism treadmill in these linguistic environments.



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I. INTRODUCTION

Euphemisms in workplace communication have a multifaceted impact, influencing perceptions of ethical behavior, transparency, and interpersonal dynamics. On one hand, they can soften the delivery of sensitive information, leading to more favorable judgments of ethical actions and making unethical practices appear less offensive (Farrow et al., 2021). The

occupation such as 'Building Services Coordinator' is more sophisticated than 'Maintenance Worker,' which is itself a euphemism for earlier terms like 'Custodian,' 'Janitor,' 'Maintenance Man,' and 'Cleaner.' However, while euphemisms may create a more comfortable communication atmosphere, they often reduce transparency, potentially leading to misunderstandings (Rittenburg et al., 2016).

Euphemisms play a significant role in language as a tool for managing sensitive topics, enhancing communication, and influencing emotional responses. They serve as a strategic linguistic device to navigate complex social interactions, often by softening the impact of potentially offensive or controversial subjects (Crespo-Fernández, 2018; Yang, 2023). Euphemisms are not only about softening language but also about achieving specific communicative goals, such as maintaining social harmony, avoiding taboos, to soften the impact of harsh or unpleasant realities, and manipulating public perception (Burridge, 2012; Jamet, 2018; Adaileh, 2023).

The role of euphemism as a tool for shaping narratives and managing public perception has been discussed by Fernández (2018) which investigates the strategic use of euphemism in political discourse. Focusing on local and state politicians in New Jersey, USA and through a critical discourse analysis of quotations from the state's largest newspaper, the study reveals that politicians employ euphemisms a deliberate strategy for self-protection and positive self-presentation. Euphemisms allow these politicians to address sensitive or taboo topics, such as socio-economic issues and political controversies, without appearing insensitive or evasive. Euphemistic terms can become a strategic action without engendering perceptions of dishonesty (Walker, 2021). These findings underscore the subtle yet potent role of euphemisms in shaping judgments and highlight the ethical implications of their use in professional communication.

In a workplace, euphemisms are rooted in the need to mitigate the negative connotations, without exception related to job termination, thereby preserving the dignity of the affected individual and maintaining an appearance of professional propriety. A sharp in productivity of job termination euphemisms can be attributed to several factors, including the desire to avoid direct confrontation, minimize legal liability, and uphold organizational reputation. Allan and Burridge (1991) hypothesize that euphemisms serve as a linguistic strategy to navigate taboo subjects, of which job termination is a noteworthy example in the corporate environment.

The topic of job termination is very sensitive to discuss directly, which has led to the creation of many euphemistic expressions. The English neutral expression for job termination is "layoff". However, the variety of euphemistic expressions for this concept, ranging from "downsizing", "career transition", "constructive discharge", "involuntary separation", "restructure", etc. The news website www.thoughtco.com published an article titled "51 Euphemisms for 'You're Fired'," which demonstrates that expressions with the meaning of job termination continue to be produced to meet the need for politeness and to

reduce sensitivity (Nordquist, 2017). The prevalence of euphemistic expressions for job termination in professional discourse reflects the inherent sensitivity and potential face-threatening nature of employment termination.

Those proliferation of euphemistic expressions exemplifies the linguistic phenomenon known as the euphemism treadmill. This concept describes the cyclical process whereby euphemisms are created to replace terms that have acquired negative connotations, only for the new expressions to eventually assume the same unfavorable associations (Pinker, 2003). Despite the growing body of research on treadmill euphemisms in English, there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding Chinese and Indonesian comparative studies, especially in the scope of treadmill euphemisms on job termination. This lack of comparative research limits our understanding of the similarities and differences in euphemistic strategies employed in these two culturally distinct yet economically significant Asian contexts.

This study seeks to investigate the phenomenon of the euphemism treadmill as it concerns to job termination in Indonesian and Chinese languages, focusing on three primary research questions. First, what are the common euphemisms for job termination in Indonesian and Chinese? And second, what cultural factors contribute to similarities or differences in euphemism usage between Indonesian and Chinese? This study aims to contribute to the exploration on euphemisms in Indonesian and Chinese languages, with a specific focus on the domain of job termination. It focuses on the diachronic aspect of euphemism usage, the euphemism treadmill. This effect could describe how euphemisms tend to take on the negative connotations of their referents over time, necessitating their replacement with new euphemistic words creation. By applying euphemism treadmill as main theory and adopting a comparative approach, this research aims to compile and systematically analyze the various euphemistic expressions used.

To contextualize the use of job termination euphemisms within the broader cultural frameworks of Indonesian and Chinese societies, Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions theory will expose how cultural values such as collectivism, power distance, and the concept of "face" influence the formation and usage of these euphemisms. This analysis will also consider the impact of globalization and changing workplace dynamics on euphemism usage on business communication in Chinese and Indonesian contexts. By addressing these objectives, this research could contribute to both theoretical and practical understandings of euphemisms in Indonesian and Chinese. Comparative studies between Indonesian and Chinese euphemisms are important to identify both universal patterns and culture-specific features of euphemistic usage.

The concept of the euphemism treadmill was initially introduced by Steven Pinker (1994; 2003) wherein he explains that individuals fabricate new 'polite' lexemes to denote emotionally charged or unpleasant subjects. However, the euphemism subsequently becomes pollute by association; leave no choice but to emergence a new term which

invariably acquires its own adverse connotations. The euphemism treadmill is a linguistic phenomenon where new, inoffensive terms are created to replace words considered sensitive or offensive. However, these new terms eventually take on the negative connotations of the words they replaced. This leads to a continuous cycle of creating and replacing euphemisms.

An illustrative example of the euphemism treadmill is the changing terminology used to refer to intellectual disabilities. Terms like "idiot," "moron," and "imbecile" were once clinical classifications in the early 20th century, but they gradually became common insults with highly negative connotations. To replace these offensive terms, "mentally retarded" was introduced as a more neutral, clinical label. However, over time, "retarded" also took on derogatory meanings. In response, "intellectually disabled" emerged as a more respectful alternative, though it too is susceptible to eventually acquiring negative connotations. To further address this issue, "special needs" has been adopted as a more positive or neutral term for individuals with various disabilities. More recently, some advocacy groups have started using "neurodivergent," although this term is broader and not a direct equivalent.

Johansson (2022) investigates the semantic evolution of disability-related adjectives ("lame," "crippled," "handicapped," "disabled") in American English from the 1900s to the 2010s using the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA). The study draws on the concept of the Pinker's euphemism treadmill to explain the observed patterns of change, where newer terms replace older ones as they acquire negative connotations. Through this analysis, the study reveals the emergence of metaphorical and metonymical uses, as well as the impact of social and cultural factors, such as the US civil rights movement, on language use related to disability.

This ongoing cycle exemplifies the euphemism treadmill, where new euphemisms are created to avoid offense but eventually take on the negative associations of the original terms, necessitating the creation of new euphemisms over time. The euphemism treadmill illustrates that it's the underlying concepts, rather than the specific words, that dominate people's thoughts. To analyze the use of euphemisms in job termination within Indonesian and Chinese contexts, this study employs Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions theory which provides a systematic approach to understanding how values in the workplace are influenced by national culture. By applying his cultural dimensions, particularly Power Distance Index (PDI), Individualism versus Collectivism (IDV), Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI), and Long-Term Orientation (LTO), this research explained the underlying cultural factors that drive the euphemism treadmill phenomenon in employment termination discourse.

Power Distance Index (PDI) refers to the extent to which less powerful members of organizations and institutions accept and expect that power is distributed unequally, Individualism versus Collectivism (IDV) examines the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups, and Long-Term Orientation (LTO) relates to the degree to which a society embraces, or does not embrace, long-term devotion to traditional, forward-thinking

values. Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory provides a strong framework for understanding cross-cultural differences in values, behaviors, and communication patterns. This theory is particularly relevant to examine euphemism treadmills in job termination language within Indonesian and Chinese contexts, as it offers insights into the cultural factors that may influence the creation, usage, and evolution of euphemisms in these distinct linguistic and cultural environments.

II. METHOD

The methodology not only facilitates a linguistic comparison but also incorporates cultural and social dimensions, contributing to the broader discourse on language, culture, and societal change (Supriyadi, F.A., Junining, E., & Yulianto, W.E., 2024). This study employs a mixed-methods approach to investigate the euphemism treadmill phenomenon in job termination language within Indonesian and Chinese context, to address the research questions comprehensively. Data collection process involves two sources. This study uses a systematic approach to data collection, comprised three prominent Chinese economic news outlets and three Indonesian business and economic news websites, selected for their significant readership and influence in their respective countries' economic discourse (Fang & Faure, 2011; Tapsell, 2015; Fatim, Hamid, and Mubasyiroh, 2024).

For the Chinese corpus, we examined articles from 每日经济新闻 "National Business Daily" (<https://www.nbd.com.cn/>), 第一财经 "China Business Network" (<https://m.yicai.com/>), and 经济日报 "The Economic Daily" (<http://www.ce.cn/>). These sources were chosen due to their wide readership and reputation for comprehensive coverage of economic issues. Similarly, the Indonesian corpus was compiled from articles published on CNBC Indonesia (<https://www.cnbcindonesia.com/>), Bisnis (<https://www.bisnis.com/>), and Kontan (<https://www.kontan.co.id/>), which are recognized as leading sources of business and economic news in Indonesia.

To ensure a contemporary and relevant dataset, we focused on articles published between January 2019 and December 2023, encompassing a five-year period that includes the significant economic changes brought about by the global COVID-19 pandemic. The data collection process involved using a combination of keyword searches and manual screening, following methods similar to those employed by Allan and Burridge (2006) in their study of euphemisms. We initially employed a list of known euphemisms for job termination in both languages, supplemented by related terms such as "corporate restructuring," "workforce optimization," and their equivalents in Chinese and Indonesian.

This initial search was followed by a thorough manual examination of the retrieved articles to identify context-specific euphemisms that might not have been captured by the keyword search. To ensure the reliability of our data, we engaged two native speakers for each language to independently review and code the collected expressions, with any discrepancies resolved through discussion and consensus, adhering to best practices in

cross-linguistic research (Brislin, 1970; Harkness et al., 2010). This rigorous approach allowed us to compile a comprehensive corpus of euphemistic expressions used in economic contexts to discuss job terminations in both Chinese and Indonesian media, providing a solid foundation for our analysis of the euphemism treadmill phenomenon in these languages (Pinker, 1994; Burridge, 2012).

Analytical approach in this study will employ a linguistic comparative framework to analyze similarities and differences between Indonesian and Chinese job termination euphemisms. This analysis will draw on the contrastive approach to examine the euphemism treadmill cultural dimension within two languages, involving both descriptive and interpretive methods. Cultural factors influencing euphemism usage were analyzed using a sociolinguistic lens, drawing upon Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions theory to interpret how cultural values such as power distance, collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance manifest in language practices.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis reveals clear evidence of a euphemism treadmill effect in Chinese and Indonesian for job termination expressions. This effect is characterized by the continuous creation and replacement of euphemistic terms as they lose their mitigating power over time. The findings are structured into five categories: high euphemistic expressions, moderate euphemistic expressions, mild euphemistic expressions, direct euphemisms, and euphemisms with specific connotations. These categories allow for a clearer comparison of linguistic patterns across the two languages while linking them to theoretical discussions on communication and cultural values.

High Euphemistic Expressions

High euphemistic terms are often employed to mask the harsh reality of job termination, offering a positive or neutral framing. In Chinese, expressions such as 人员优化 (rényuán yōuhuà) "personnel optimization," 结构重组 (jiégòu chóngzǔ) "structural reorganization," and 友好分手 (yǒuhǎo fēnshǒu) "friendly parting" exemplify this trend. The Indonesian counterparts include *merumahkan* "to send home," which shifts attention from the act of termination to a seemingly temporary or less severe action. These terms reflect an effort to align the communication of job termination with broader organizational strategies or a sense of mutual agreement, reducing the stigma associated with being laid off.

Moderate Euphemistic Expressions

Moderate euphemistic terms offer a slightly less polished framing, frequently connecting job terminations to organizational adjustments. In Chinese, phrases like 非自愿离职人员 (fēi zìyuàn lízhí rényuán) "involuntary termination of employment," 员工重组 (yuángōng chóngzǔ) "employee restructuring," and 人员调整 (rényuán tiáozhěng) "personnel adjustment" are commonly used. In Indonesian, similar expressions include *restrukturisasi tenaga kerja* "workforce restructuring," *efisiensi perusahaan* "company efficiency," and *restrukturisasi*

perusahaan "company restructuring." These terms serve to depersonalize the process and connect terminations to necessary organizational changes, framing them as part of a broader strategy rather than individual circumstances.

Mild Euphemistic Expressions

Mild euphemisms take a more direct tone while still attempting to soften the impact. In Chinese, examples include 精简人员 (jīngjiǎn rényuán) "streamline personnel" and 人员流动 (rényuán liúdòng) "personnel flow." In Indonesian, terms like *pengurangan tenaga kerja* "workforce reduction," *perampingan struktur organisasi* "streamlining organizational structure," and *efisiensi sumber daya manusia* "human resource efficiency" are frequently used. These expressions acknowledge job losses but frame them in terms of efficiency or structural necessity, maintaining a degree of mitigation while avoiding overt bluntness.

Direct Euphemisms

Direct euphemisms offer little mitigation, serving as formal yet slightly softened alternatives to blunt expressions. In Chinese, 解雇 (jiěgù) "dismiss" is a common term. In Indonesian, equivalents include *memberhentikan* "to terminate" and *pemutusan hubungan kerja (PHK)* "termination of employment relationship." These terms are procedural and neutral in tone, often used in legal or formal contexts to convey clarity without unnecessary harshness. However, as these terms gain widespread use, their euphemistic effect diminishes over time.

Euphemisms with Specific Connotations

Some euphemisms carry specific cultural or contextual connotations, adding nuance to the expression of job termination. In Chinese, 被炒鱿鱼 (bèi chǎo yóuyú) "to be fired" is a colloquial term for being fired, often used humorously or informally. Other terms like 毕业 (bìyè) "graduate," common in the tech industry, and 结构性失业 (jiégòuxìng shīyè) "structural unemployment" connect job losses to broader economic trends. In Indonesian, similar expressions include *menonaktifkan* "to deactivate," *pensiun dini* "early retirement," and *tidak diperpanjang kontraknya* "contract not renewed." These terms often reflect specific industries or circumstances, emphasizing the context of the termination.

Cultural and Communicative Dimensions of Euphemisms

The recurring emergence of new euphemistic terms in both Chinese and Indonesian reflects the euphemism treadmill phenomenon, where expressions lose their mitigating effect over time and are replaced by new ones. For instance, 解雇 (jiěgù) "dismiss," once considered a formal term, now feels blunt and has been replaced by alternatives like 人员优化 (rényuán yōuhuà) "personnel optimization" or 人员调整 (rényuán tiáozhěng) "personnel adjustment." Similarly, in Indonesian, *merumahkan* "to send home" has emerged as a softer alternative to direct terms like *memberhentikan* "to terminate." Over time, as *merumahkan*

becomes associated with job loss, new terms like *optimalisasi* may arise to maintain a positive framing.

During periods of economic restructuring, terms such as 结构重组 (*jiégòu chóngzǔ*) and *restrukturisasi tenaga kerja* gain prominence, linking job losses to organizational strategies. These terms help deflect attention from individual employees by emphasizing the necessity of broader strategic measures for organizational survival or efficiency. Euphemisms such as 友好分手 (*yǒuhǎo fēnshǒu*) "friendly parting" and 毕业 (*bìyè*) "graduate" are often used to emphasize mutual agreement and positive framing when employee morale is a concern.

Globalization and corporate language have introduced terms like 人员优化 (*rényuán yōuhuà*) and 精简人员 (*jīngjiǎn rényuán*) that mirror managerial jargon and emphasize efficiency. These terms depersonalize the process, focusing on organizational needs rather than individual impacts. Colloquial expressions like 被炒鱿鱼 (*bèi chǎo yóuyú*), while humorous or informal, are generally avoided in professional contexts to maintain decorum.

Influence of Cultural Dimensions on Euphemism Use

Both China and Indonesia exhibit high Power Distance Index (PDI) scores, with Indonesia at 78 and China at 80 (Hofstede, 2001; Irawan, 2017; Sha, 2018). This suggests a stronger tendency to use euphemisms in hierarchical communication, particularly when addressing sensitive topics such as job termination. Euphemisms help maintain respect and avoid direct confrontation, aligning with the Chinese concept of 面子 (*miànzi*) "face," which emphasizes dignity and harmony in interpersonal interactions (Kinnison, 2017).

As collectivist societies (Powell, 2018; Mangundjaya, 2013), both cultures prioritize group cohesion and social harmony. Euphemistic language mitigates potential conflicts and preserves relationships, crucial in maintaining interpersonal harmony. While Indonesia has a moderate Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) score of 48 (Artina et al., 2020), China's lower UAI score of 30 (Guanglong, 2023) reflects a higher tolerance for ambiguity. Both cultures exhibit a preference for indirect communication, with euphemisms functioning as buffers against the unpredictability of adverse reactions from affected employees.

In terms of Long-Term Orientation (LTO), China scores exceptionally high at 87, while Indonesia has a more moderate score of 62. This reflects a cultural emphasis on preserving long-term relationships and societal stability. Euphemisms align with this strategic, long-term communication style, considering the future implications of language use on professional relationships.

IV. CONCLUSION

By examining euphemistic expressions from prominent economic news outlets in both languages, this study had identified a clear pattern of euphemism replacement, demonstrate that both Indonesian and Chinese languages exhibit a rich array of euphemisms for job termination. The continuous evolution of job termination euphemisms in both languages is

deeply rooted in cultural factors, as illuminated by Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions theory. The high score of Power Distance Index (PDI) in both China and Indonesia indicates a societal acceptance of hierarchical structures and an expectation of unequal power distribution. This cultural characteristic fosters indirect communication strategies, particularly in sensitive contexts like job termination, to maintain respect and avoid direct confrontation between superiors and subordinates.

The collectivist nature of both societies places a strong emphasis on group harmony and interpersonal relationships. The use of euphemisms functions as a linguistic mechanism to preserve social cohesion and mitigate the face-threatening act of terminating employment. The concept of "face" (面子, *miànzi*) in Chinese culture, and its parallel in Indonesian social norms, underscores the importance of dignity and respect in communication practices. The study also highlights the influence of long-term orientation in these cultures. In China, with its exceptionally high LTO score, there is a pronounced focus on future rewards and the preservation of enduring relationships. Euphemistic language in job termination aligns with this outlook by striving to minimize immediate discomfort while safeguarding long-term social and professional networks.

Future research could expand the corpus to include spoken language data, corporate communications, and social media discourse to provide a more comprehensive picture. Further comparative studies involving other cultures and languages could enhance our understanding of universal versus culture-specific patterns in euphemism usage. Investigating the impact of globalization and digital communication on the evolution of euphemisms would also be a fruitful avenue for exploration.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors wish to express their most sincere gratitude to Prof. Dr. Suhandano, M.A. and Dr. Sailal Arimi, M.Hum., their advisors at Universitas Gadjah Mada, who devoted considerable time to this work at every stage.

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