



## **Use of Euphemistic Expressions in Translation: A Study Based on Malayalam Translated Scriptures.**

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**Submission Date: 12.03.2025**

**Acceptance Date: 24.03.2025**

### **Abstract**

Euphemism is characterised by the avoidance of rough or impolite language. Therefore, Euphemistic expressions are frequently used in religious texts to avoid taboos and maintain their sacredness. The present study focuses on the euphemistic expressions in Malayalam scriptures by analysing their types, themes, and some cognitive aspects. The aim of the study is to identify how death, excretion, and sex-related euphemisms have been translated into the Malayalam Bible and also to compare the cognitive perspectives of euphemization in Malayalam and English, using the embodied framework in light of the instances extracted from the scriptures. The data for the study has been taken from the Sathyavedhapusthakam Bible translation published by the Bible Society of India (BSI). The data for comparison with English scripture was taken from the King James English Translation. A text or Bible survey method was used in the study to collect the data and analyse it using the embodied cognitive framework. The euphemistic expressions related to death, excretion, and sex in Bible translation underwent analytical procedures. The study found that comparing the euphemised expressions in English and Malayalam translations proved that the different cultural backgrounds have different strategic solutions to solve the problem of taboo by resorting to commonly acceptable expressions instead of their dispreferred counterparts.

**Keywords:** Euphemism, Scripture Translation, Embodied Cognitive Method, Dysphemism, Sociolinguistic approach

## **Introduction**

Euphemism is characterized by the avoidance of rough or impolite language. It means that when choosing words or expressions, consideration is given to avoiding potentially offensive expressions and shielding the audience from the full negative implications of other choices (Douglas. T., 2020). The compositionality and functions of religious languages are built upon the preserved values of holiness and inviolability. Therefore, Euphemistic expressions are frequently used in religious texts to avoid taboos and maintain their sacredness. As viewed from a semantic standpoint, religious language eludes historical space-time categories to construct a world of transcendental essence and establish an intimate connection between man and God (Mocanu, 2017). Religious language reflects the features of communication between supernatural entities and human beings and also accounts for communication between humans. Therefore, the language of the scriptures is a peculiar linguistic tool that deserves special and keen attention when being analysed from an academic point of view. Euphemism is one of the edifying factors of the Biblical language that echoes socio-cultural and psycho-cognitive patterns of the particular speech communities. For instance, the Jews, even today, refuse to pronounce the name YAHWEH, so its original pronunciation is no longer certain. Moreover, the holiest name is replaced by other names (Ellingworth & Mojola, 1986). The use of euphemisms in religious texts has been extensively studied, employing the theoretical frameworks in translation studies

(Albarakati. M, 2014 & Muhammed Bello, 2014) and exegetical philosophies. As euphemism is analysed in light of the aspects of translation, by default, the focus falls on how euphemistic expressions in the source text are incorporated into the linguistic and cultural settings of the target language. Therefore, it paves the way for discovering the possibility of comparing euphemization strategies and translation techniques across languages and cultures. The present study focuses on the euphemistic expressions in Malayalam scriptures by analysing their types, themes, and some cognitive aspects. In light of the lack of studies of euphemistic expressions in Malayalam, this study seeks to understand the general trends in the euphemization of linguistic expressions and identify how it operates in translating religious texts, specifically the Bible. This study has the following two objectives;

1. To identify how death, excretion, and sex-related euphemisms have been translated into the Malayalam Bible
2. To compare the cognitive perspectives of euphemization in Malayalam and English, using the embodied framework in light of the instances extracted from the scriptures.

## **Euphemisms in the Malayalam Bible**

In the Hebrew Biblical textual history, euphemistic forces can also be found regarding participant reference (politeness) and reference to both positive and negative taboos (Warren-Rothlin, 2013). Moreover, it is most common for euphemisms to be used to denote taboos surrounding specific body parts and their functions, such as sex, excretion, and

certain types of illnesses, as well as death. Many Bible translations handled these linguistic, social, and textual euphemisms differently, adding their own euphemisms in the process (Warren-Rothlin, *ibid*). This study focuses on how socially restricted or tabooed expressions, such as death, excretion, and sex, have been translated into the Malayalam Bible. Considering the high level of readership and prevalence, the Malayalam Sathyavedhapusthakam Bible translation published by the Bible Society of India (BSI) was chosen for the analysis.

### **Sathyavedhapusthakam**

The translation of the Malayalam Bible has gone through different stages. The Malayalam translation of Archdeacon Koshy was published in 1910 under the title Sathyavedhapusthakam. Thereafter, the BSI started publishing new versions of this translation till date. This translation is widely used by almost all protestant groups in the Malayalam speech community. Sathyavedhapusthakam is a collection of sixty-six books written by over forty authors. The books in the Bible have been classified into two: the Old and New Testaments. The present study used a Bible survey method to identify the potential euphemistic expressions and the context in which they have been used in the Sathyavedhapusthakam. This method is considered a Bible reference tool to provide easy access to locating Bible content and a deep understanding of the same (Christopher Cone, 2012). Moreover, this comprehensive approach helps to survey the text and analyse and synthesise it.

### **Euphemisms in Sathyavedhapusthakam**

Euphemistic expressions are extremely rich in holy scriptures for cultural, literary, and other communicative reasons. In this section, the study seeks to place some instances of euphemisms found in the Sathyavedhapusthakam with a particular reference to their usage contexts. In Bible translation, euphemism is one of the critical elements with social, cultural, and religious impacts. Therefore, translating euphemisms from a source language to a target language is a highly complex task that requires a thorough understanding of socio-cultural attitudes towards the themes and strategies of euphemization in the target speech communities. Due to this, the Bible translators not only handle euphemistic expressions as a linguistic element but also treat them as an element of cultural anthropology. Moreover, a euphemized expression in the source text could be non-euphemized in the target language due to cultural variations. For instance, in some African cultures, referring to the names of reproductive organs directly is a common thing in everyday contexts. However, many of the mainstream evangelical churches, influenced by European prudery, have tabooed certain forms of reference, such that the language of African Bible translations is unnaturally euphemistic (Warren-Rothlin, 2013). Regarding the Malayalam Bible translation, several socially restricted themes can be found euphemized. The present study only focused on the euphemization of death, excretion, and sex-related terms in the Sathyavedhapusthakam. The following sections discuss the euphemistic expressions for death, excretion, sex act and sex organs identified in the Sathyavedhapusthakam.

Death related euphemisms

The Malayalam Sathyavedhapusthakam uses indirect words and phrases to imply death in different contexts.

Theme	Reference	BSI Translation	Literal Meaning
Death	1 King 2:2	ṇān sakala b <sup>h</sup> ūvāsikaḷuṭejum vaṭṭijāji <b>pōkuṇ ṇ u.</b>	I <b>go</b> the way of all the inhabitants of the earth.
	Mattew 26:24	ṭanne kuriccG e.ṭuṭṭiji.ikkun ṇ aṭGppōle manuṣja puṭṭan <b>pōkuṇ ṇ u</b> saṭṭjam.	The son of man is <b>going</b> as it is written about him.
	Job 16:22	ṇān maṭaṇṇi <b>vaṭṭa</b> <b>pāṭajkkG pokēṭṭi</b> <b>vaṭumallo.</b>	I will have to <b>go</b> to the <b>unreturnable path.</b>
	Jeremiah 51:39	uṇarāṭavanṇam <b>ṇiṭja ṇid</b> <b>ra</b> kolḷeṭṭaṭinG ṇān avarkkG oru pāṇijam orukki.	I gave them a drink so they would fall into <b>eternal sleep</b> without waking up.
	1 Corinthians 11:30	anekarum <b>ṇid ra</b> kolluṇ ṇ u.	Many are <b>asleep.</b>
	Genesis 3:19	ṇī potijākuṇ ṇ u, potijil <b>ṭirike</b> <b>cērum.</b>	You are dust, and you will <b>return</b> to dust.
	Genesis 49:33	<b>prāṇane viṭṭu.</b>	<b>Left soul</b>
	Nahum 1:12	avan <b>kaṭṭṇu pokum</b>	He will <b>pass through</b>
	Job 17:16	<b>viṭṭamam</b>	<b>Rest</b>
	2 King 22:20	<b>piṭṭakkanmārōṭ&amp;</b> <b>certṭukollum</b>	<b>Gathered with</b> <b>ancestors</b>
Get killed	Jeremiah 11:19	jīvanuḷḷavaruṭe dēṭaṭṭG ṇiṇṇG <b>cēḷ iccu</b> <b>kaḷajum</b>	<b>Cut off</b> from the land of the living
	I Samuel 4:10	<b>viṇ&amp; pōkaṭṭakkavṇam</b>	In order to fall <b>down</b>

Excretion-Related

The process and organs of excretion are mentioned in various contexts in the source language Bible. Hence, they are in the *Sathyavedhapusthakam*. However, the strategies for translating these expressions have not remained the same throughout the translation. The following table only accounts for how these expressions have been indirectly and politely translated.

Excretion	1 Samuel 24:3	faul <b>kālmaṭakkattin&amp;</b> aṭṭil kaṭaṇṇu	Saul went in to <b>fold</b> <b>his leg</b>
	Deuteronomy 23:12	<b>bāhjattin&amp;</b> <b>pōokuvān</b> ṇinakkoru sṭalam pālajattinG purattG uṇṭājirikkaṇam	You should have a place outside the camp where you can <b>go out</b> .
	Matthew 15:17	vaajikkakattG kadakkuṇṇ aṭG ellam vajattil ceṇ ṇ ittu <b>marappurajil</b> <b>pokuṇṇu</b> enṇu grahikkuṇṇillayo?	Do you not yet realize that whatever enters the mouth <b>goes</b> <b>into</b> the stomach and then to the <b>hiding room?</b>

**Sex-Related**

Various euphemistic expressions to refer to various types of intimate relations between a man and a woman and reflects the cultural, social and religious norms of the society are found in the Malayalam Bible.

Having intercourse normally with wives	Genesis 4:1	/anaṇṭaram manuṣjan ṭaṇṭe: ba:ra a:ja havva:je: <b>parigrahicu/</b>	Adam bedded with his wife
Having intercourse	Genesis 19:33	/varika; appanā:l santati labhikkaṇṭat <sup>h</sup> in avane vi:ṇ <sup>h</sup> u kuḍippic <sup>h</sup> u avano:ṭukvi:ḍe <b>fajikka</b> ennu parañṇu/	Come; to receive offspring from the father, she said to make him drink wine and <b>lie with</b> him.
Having sexual relationship	Leviticus 18:6	/ṇ <sup>h</sup> agnaṭa anāvṛṭam ākkuka/	<b>Uncover</b> <b>nakedness</b>

Having sexual relationship		/jɪsʰa:k tɛntɐ bʰa:rɪjaja:u ribek:a:jw:tu:ku:de vɪŋ o:ɖ ʰikkun ŋ aɖ u kendu/	<b>Entertaining with</b>
Not having sex with a woman	1 Corinthians 7:1	/stɪrɪje tɔtɔɪɪrɪkkun ŋ aɖ/	<b>not to touch</b> a woman
Do not have sex with	Leviticus 18:4	/'avante 'bʰa:ryaj:o:ɖu aɖukkajumaru 'tɔ/	<b>Don't go close</b> to his wife
Rape	Isaiah 13:16	/avarute ba:rja ma:re apama:nɪk:um/	They will <b>insult</b> their wives.
Rape	Zechariah 14:2	/stɪrɪ:kaɭe vafa:la:kkukawau/	<b>corrupt women</b>
Rape	2 Samuel 13:14	/ba'la:lk:a:ram cejɪtu/	Did an <b>act of violence</b>
Rape	Genesis 34:2	/avaɭk:u 'po:ra:jka varuɕi/	<b>Defiled</b> her
Male Genital	Genesis 24:2	/tuɪajɪŋ 'ki:zɪl/	<b>Under thigh</b>
Male Genital	Leviticus 15:2	/aŋgam/	<b>Member or part</b>

**Observations on the use of Euphemism in the Malayalam Bible**

The Malayalam Sathyavedhapusthakam has used euphemisms extensively to replace tabooed expressions, therefore to avoid what people remark as impolite so that not to be included in the scripture translation. As this study categorized the three significant types of euphemisms, it was found that Malayalam translation used various semantic-pragmatic strategies to exclude the explicit use of tabooed expressions under various categories of euphemisms. Mostly, the expressions that replace death and related are metaphorical, whereas death is perceived as a journey and sleep, so that used the words bearing meanings of ‘go, goings, path, return’ and ‘fall asleep, eternal sleep, rest, etc. These usages imply the belief in life after death or eternal life in the Christian creed or the Jewish tradition.

Expressions for excretion and related also used metaphors and other strategies like description and circumlocution. For instance, 1st Samuel 24:3 talks about King Saul entering into a cave to excrete, but in the Malayalam translation, it is stated as 'ɟaul kālmaɪakkattɪnG aɪɭ kaɪaŋ ŋ u.' Here, the expression 'kālmaɪakkattɪnG,' literally means fold the leg is the circumlocution through which using indirect or roundabout expressions to avoid using a more direct or potentially offensive term. The expression, indeed, is an outward representation of the Malayalee's cognition of the act of excretion as posturing the body shape, where the people typically sat on the ground folding their legs. Moreover, the expression for excretion used in Matthew 15:17 is an example of description or illustration,

in which, instead of stating the direct word or expression for the act, the place ‘marappurajil pokuṇṇ u’ means ‘hiding/covered room’ where the act is performed to indicate the purpose of the said in the context.

Sex and related as well have used understatement, circumlocution, descriptions, loanwords, and metaphors to avoid the explicit ones. For instance, the expression ‘parigrahīcu’ is one of the most used words for sexual intercourse, especially between husband and wife. The word means ‘bedded’ or ‘have physical contact with.’ The word itself sounds direct in terms of its meaning; however, its Sanskrit origin makes it feel less offensive compared to its dispreferred counterpart. The rationale behind the composition of these expressions reveals the cognition of the euphemised expressions of tabooed concepts by the Malayalee speech community.

### Comparison of Euphemisms in Malavalam and English Scriptures

The second objective of the study is to compare the cognitive perspectives of euphemization in Malayalam and English, using the embodied cognition framework, in light of the instances extracted from the scriptures. The linguistic subject's embodied understanding of identity with reality suggests that euphemisms replace common expressions to address unpleasant or embarrassing situations, as euphemisms essentially carry the same meaning as the common expressions (Long. D, 2024). Therefore, exploring how the English and Malayalam scripture translations have adopted the common expressions are expected to reveal how translations are different in terms of revealing the pattern of cognition. Some selective examples have been plotted here to explain the pattern of similarity and differences at the cognitive level of euphemization. The data for the comparison with the English scripture has been taken from the most circulated and prevalent version of English Bible translation, i.e., the King James Version (KJV) English Bible.

Theme	Verse	English Version	Malayalam Version	Literal meaning of Malayalam
Excretion	1 Samuel 24:3	Saul went in to <b>cover his feet</b>		Saul went in to <b>fold his leg</b>
			ṣaul kālmaṭakkattin & aṭṭil kaṭaṇṇu	
Sex	Genesis 4:1	Adam <b>knew</b> Eve his wife	ananṭaram manuṣjan taṇte: ba:rja a:ja hauva:je: <b>parigrahicu</b>	Adam <b>bedded</b> with his wife
	Leviticus 15:2	<b>Flesh</b>	<b>aṅgam</b>	<b>Member or part</b>
Death	1 King 2:2	I <b>go</b> the way of all the earth	nān sakala b <sup>h</sup> ūvāsikaḷutejum varijāji <b>pōkun</b> u	I <b>go</b> the way of all the inhabitants of the earth.

### **Discussions on the comparison**

KJV and other versions, such as the American standard version, have used the expression 'Saul went into the cave to cover his feet' instead of 'Saul went into the cave to excrete or defecate.' At the cognitive level, this euphemism works by using metaphor and conceptual blending. "Covering the feet" can be understood as a metaphorical way to talk about the act of relieving oneself, where the "feet" may be associated with a person's lower extremities, and "covering" can imply modesty or a form of concealment. Another perception is that in the cultural context, people cover their feet with their pants or other clothes on the lower body as they remove them to excrete. Therefore, instead of mentioning the act of excretion, emphasis is given to the subsequent cloth position as it comes down from the waist and covers the feet. But, in the Malayalam translation, it is used as 'kāḷmaṭakkam,' which literally means fold legs. The cognitive rationale of the composition is that in those days, in the cultural contexts of Malayalees, that squatting position. In this posture, the individual squats down with their knees bent, feet flat on the ground, and their body positioned close to the ground or the toilet seat, which is typically built into the floor rather than a raised seat like in Western-style toilets. Hence, these differences are culturally explicable and, therefore, the patterns of their cognition.

Instead of Adam having sex with Eve, the KJV used 'Adam knew Eve.' This usage implies that the characters mentioned have known each other's bodies through their sexual encounters. In this English translation, a generic and metaphoric strategy has been employed to conceal the realities of sex by the use of a common word. The embodied cognition places that sex also has the qualities of knowing each other. Whereas in the Malayalam translation, as aforementioned, a Sanskrit origin word 'parigrahīcu' has been used. Moreover, the male genital organ is called 'flesh' (Leviticus 15:2) in the KJV. In this case, "flesh" is a broad term that often symbolizes the body, including all parts of the human form, but does not necessarily point to any specific part. In biblical and ancient Hebrew thought, "flesh" could symbolize human physicality in a general sense. From a cognitive perspective, it may reflect a conceptual blending where bodily parts and functions are

framed as part of a larger, more abstract concept of human physicality, avoiding focus on specific body parts that might be considered unseemly for public discussion. The Malayalam translation has used the word 'aṅgam,' which literally means part of something or a member of a family. Though this is also a generic and ambiguous term, however, in the Malayalee culture, the male genital organ is often perceived as an unspecified part of the body, whereas the English culture uses the word for the whole body.

The embodied cognitive perspective reveals notable similarities between Malayalee and English cultures, particularly in how death-related euphemisms are framed at the cognitive level. Both cultures metaphorically conceptualize death through the lens of a journey. This shared view among these cultures is expected to stem from the universal influence Christian teaching that emphasises the temporariness of the earthly life and frame the existence of mankind as a journey toward the eternal life God. Therefore, due to this common belief both



cultures tend to use euphemisms like "journey" and "sleep" to refer to death, rather than directly mentioning dying. This reflects the idea that death is not an end, but rather a transition in the ongoing spiritual journey. This reflects the idea that death is not an end but a transition—an inevitable passage that aligns with spiritual notions of life's impermanence and the hope for an afterlife.

## Conclusion

The Malayalam scripture translation has extensively used euphemistic expressions to replace the explicit use of tabooed and unpleasant expressions. In order to fulfil this, various semantic-pragmatic strategies have been used in the translation. Moreover, the in- detailed analysis of the euphemistic expressions will reveal the cognitive and cultural parameters of the language community. Therefore, the comparison between the euphemized expressions in English and Malayalam translations proved that the different cultural backgrounds have different strategic solutions to solve the problem of taboo by resorting to commonly acceptable expressions instead of their dispreferred counterparts. However, cognitive analysis is a pivotal factor in establishing the actual cultural and conceptual rationale behind the composition of such euphemistic expressions. Nevertheless, specific common cognitive patterns have also been observed across these two cultures, which are expected to stem from the common and universal teaching of the religion.

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