What can menstrual euphemisms tell us about Politeness Theory's claim of universality?*

J E S S I C A   F L A C K
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

1 INTRODUCTION

Politeness is frequently utilised by speakers to maintain social norms and preserve interpersonal relationships. Verbal politeness – the relationship between the use of linguistic features and societal behavioural norms (Fraser 1990) – comprises of linguistic features such as 'it-ifying' (Jackson & Falmagne 2013), conceptual metaphor (Gathigia, Orwenjo & Ndung'u 2018), and euphemism (Allan & Burridge 2006). Euphemisms – where a speaker substitutes an unpleasant word or expression for one which is more indirect – are intrinsically linked to the conventions of politeness (Crespo 2005) as they are motivated by taboos, norms and traditions of a society (Hysi 2011). A taboo is a 'proscription of behaviour that affects everyday life' (Allan & Burridge 2006: 1) which is dependent on a society's cultural norms. Discussing a taboo subject therefore requires a speaker to censor the language they use in an effort to be polite. Resorting to euphemism in these cases avoids or reduces the potential negative effects of mentioning a taboo in a communicative exchange, thereby smoothing communication and maintaining the relationship between speaker and hearer (Crespo 2005).

Menstruation is universally perceived as a taboo due to its dirty and undesirable perceptions in many cultures (Geller, Harlow & Bernstein 1999, Agyekum 2002) which stem from negative attitudes towards bodily effluvia, particularly that of a female (Allan & Burridge 2006). Western cultures in particular stigmatise menstruation (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler 2013). Although in recent times Western nations such as Sweden are experiencing some degree of a menstrual 'revolution' (Sveen 2016), attitudes in the Western world remain overwhelmingly negative. Non-Western cultures, on the other hand, are more likely to celebrate menstruation, but this occurs in small groups and views of these groups do not represent the nation as a whole. For example, the Beng people of the Ivory Coast hold a positive view of menstruation, comparing it to a flower on a tree before it fruits (Gottlieb 1982). This is vastly different from typical attitudes of sin and pollution. However, this does not represent the overall attitude of the Ivory Coast, which remains negative (Guehi & Secredou 2019).

Menstrual euphemisms have been widely studied across cultures (Sveen 2016, Zegeye, Temesegen & Godisso 2023, Chiatoh & Lando 2021). However, these studies

largely focus on the linguistic features of menstrual euphemisms, and so far, no study has examined menstrual euphemisms through a particular politeness framework. This contribution provides a novel contribution to the field by analysing menstrual euphemisms according to Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson 1987). Politeness Theory has received significant attention in politeness studies, and despite its criticisms (e.g. Culpeper 2011) has received much empirical support (Dickey 2016). At the foreground of discussions of Politeness Theory is its claim of universality (Dickey 2016: 197). By examining expressions from both Western and non-Western cultures, the results of this study will shed light on politeness in menstrual euphemisms, and the possibility of a universal account of politeness.

2 Background

2.1 Review of previous studies

Previous studies have analysed the linguistic and sociopragmatic features of menstrual expressions across cultures. Sveen (2016) analysed menstrual expressions from American English and Swedish, identifying core semantic domains[1] made up of various euphemisms. She found several previously recognised semantic domains, such as menstruation as the colour red, as an indisposition, periodicity, and as a visitor. The study aimed to provide linguistic insight into perceptions of menstruation, and Sveen found that the linguistic expressions used in both countries perpetuated common ideas of shame and negativity. She found that American English expressions were especially blunt, while Swedish expressions were milder. These results highlighted a relationship between comfort and linguistic creativity: Swedish expressions were more literal than American English expressions as Swedish speakers were more comfortable with the concept of menstruation, therefore requiring less creativity in their expressions.

Zegeye et al. (2023) carried out a sociopragmatic analysis of euphemisms employed by female speakers of Amharic, an Ethiopian semitic language. The authors found that menstruation was associated with highly negative attitudes, and that the word menstruation was forbidden in public settings. As a result, it was solely referred to using highly indirect euphemisms such as 'month flower' (Zegeye et al. 2023: 8) to avoid openly discussing it.

Chiatoh & Lando (2021) analysed menstrual euphemisms employed by girls and women in Cameroon. They found similar semantic domains to Sveen (2016), in addition to royalty and fertility. They found that the most common reasons for using euphemisms to discuss menstruation were because it sounds more pleasant, and to avoid drawing attention to themselves when discussing it. The authors concluded that girls and women used euphemisms as a politeness strategy to 'save face', a central concept of Politeness Theory, to be discussed further in section 2.2.

These studies confirm that menstruation is universally considered a taboo and as a result, many cultures make use of euphemism to avoid discussing it directly. One study (Chiatoh & Lando 2021) briefly touched on the relationship between

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[1] A semantic domain is an area of meaning and the words used to talk about it.

menstrual euphemisms and Politeness Theory but did not do so comprehensively. The following section will outline the theory and the motivation for applying it to menstrual euphemisms.

2.2 Politeness Theory introduced

Politeness Theory was developed by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson in the 1970s and revised in 1987. The theory draws heavily upon Goffman (1967) *face theory*. The theory is based upon the notion that everyone has two faces: a positive face (the desire to be liked and appreciated by others) and a negative face (the desire for autonomy and protection of personal rights). In normal conversation, speakers aim to preserve both the hearer's and their own face. Brown and Levinson claim that some speech acts 'intrinsically threaten face' (Brown & Levinson 1987: 60), and are known as face-threatening acts (FTAs). Such acts can be split into those that threaten positive face – e.g. disapproval, accusations – and those that threaten negative face, e.g. giving orders or requests. Such speech acts require mitigation strategies to maintain face when performing them. Brown & Levinson list five strategies (Figure 1) which are appropriate for various levels of 'threat' the FTA presents. These range from (1) *Without redressive action, baldly* when the threat is lowest, to (5) *Don't do the FTA* when the threat is highest. Positive politeness strategies appeal to the speaker or hearer's positive face, and negative politeness strategies to their negative face. Off-record strategies are characterised by indirectness and are used for high-threat FTAs. Each strategy encompasses several strategies within that category. For example, positive politeness includes compliments and agreement, and negative politeness includes begging for forgiveness.
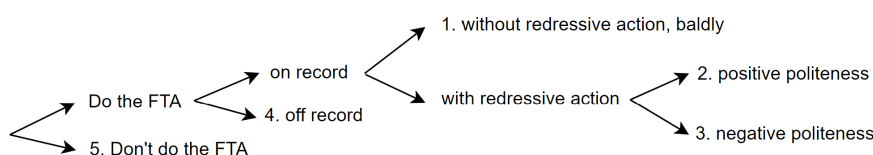
Figure 1　FTA Mitigation Strategies (Brown & Levinson 1987: 69).

Brown & Levinson list three 'sociological variables' in a formula to determine the choice of strategy: the social distance (D) between the speaker and the hearer, the power imbalance (P) between the hearer and the speaker, and the 'absolute ranking of the imposition' (R_X; Brown & Levinson 1987: 74). The weight (W_X) of the FTA is calculated using the following formula. The higher the value for W_X, the more dangerous the FTA, which influences the speaker's choice of mitigation strategy:

(1)　　$W_x = D_{(S,H)} + P_{(H,S)} + R_x$　　　　　　(Brown & Levinson 1987: 76)

Talking about taboo topics is an intrinsic FTA since the speaker indicates that they do not value the hearer's values nor fear their fears (Brown & Levinson 1987: 67). This thereby threatens the hearer's positive face. Since menstruation is universally a taboo, discussing it requires the speaker to utilise mitigation strategies. Euphemism itself is not a politeness strategy according to Brown & Levinson, but euphemisms make use of strategies such as the use of metaphor and vagueness (Brown & Levinson 1987), which are off-record strategies, reserved for the 4th highest threat level. This suggests that discussing menstruation is a highly threatening FTA.

Brown & Levinson argue that Politeness Theory can be applied universally, claiming that the notion of face is universal, but that the application of the theory can differ between cultures (Brown & Levinson 1987). However, a frequent criticism of Politeness Theory is its apparent Eurocentricity. Many academics (e.g. Ide 1989, Matsumoto 1988) argue that Politeness Theory cannot explain politeness in non-Western cultures, particularly regarding Korean and Japanese honorifics.[2] However, these criticisms rely on attributing the theory to a purely Eastern politeness phenomenon. Since menstrual euphemisms are universal, they can be used to test Politeness Theory's universality claim.

3 The Study

This study aimed to test Politeness Theory's claim of universality using menstrual euphemisms from around the world. By including expressions from Western and non-Western cultures, I aimed to determine whether politeness motivations and strategies according to Politeness Theory are universal and whether it can account for the politeness strategies found in various menstrual euphemisms.

If Politeness Theory is valid, it should be the case that the more taboo menstruation is, the more threatening the FTA of discussing it is, therefore the speaker will employ high-threat mitigation strategies such as metaphor or vagueness. If the formula can predict the choice of politeness strategy in both Western and non-Western cultures, this strengthens Politeness Theory's claim of universality. If the formula can better predict the choice of politeness strategy in Western than non-Western cultures, this provides additional evidence for the Eurocentricity criticism of Politeness Theory.

3.1 Method

Two Western and two non-Western languages were chosen for this study. The two Western languages were British English and Finnish. The former was chosen because of its large number of menstrual expressions, and the author's native knowledge of attitudes toward menstruation. The latter was chosen as, once again, Finnish uses many menstrual euphemisms, however Finland does not adopt the typically negative Western view of menstruation, but rather a neutral view where it is discussed more openly.[3] The two non-Western languages were Akan, from southern Ghana, and

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[2] Honorifics differ from 'Western' politeness in that they are socially prescribed; speakers use them out of obligation rather than a desire to be polite (Fukada & Asato 2004).

[3] My native Finnish informant spoke about the neutral attitude toward menstruation they had experienced in Finland.

Japanese. Akan was chosen because of Agyekum's (2002) paper on menstrual euphemisms in Ghana, which provided a clear insight into the stigma around menstruation as well as a list of expressions and translations. Finally, Japanese was chosen because of the literature claiming that Japanese politeness differs from Western politeness (Matsumoto 1988, Haugh 2004), and because menstruation is considered highly taboo (Stephens-Chu 2022).

Data was collected from Agyekum (2002), the Museum of Menstruation and Women's Health website[4], and the Clue period survey.[5] 25 expressions from each language were compiled into a corpus of 100 expressions (see Appendix for the full database). Next, each expression was analysed to determine which politeness strategy or strategies it employed. R_X was calculated as a standard weight for each language on a scale of one to five, where one is low and five is high. Japanese and Akan were rated a five, British English a four, and Finnish a three. This was due to the highly taboo nature of menstruation in Ghana and Japan (Agyekum 2002, Stephens-Chu 2022), whereas in the UK it is taboo but discussed more freely, and in Finland attitudes are more neutral.[6] Then, P and D from Brown & Levinson's formula were calculated according to the typical speaker/hearer and context in which the expressions are uttered.[7] For example, the Akan[8] phrase:

(2)   *ɔayi ne ho*   [Akan]

        'she has shaved herself'

Is uttered in the context of a female's first menstruation, usually by the tribal queen mother to the menstruator (Agyekum 2002). In this context, P is high due to the high position of power of the tribal queen mother, and D is lower due to the sensitive nature of the topic which is discussed between two females. Using Brown & Levinson's formula, W_X was predicted using the calculated P, D, and R_X, and this value was compared to the threat level of the strategies employed in each euphemism to determine if the formula had correctly predicted the strategy to be used. By convention, if at least 95% of expressions in a language were correctly predicted by the formula – 24 out of 25 in this case – it was determined that the formula could correctly predict politeness strategies used in that language.

4 Results

In general, languages with a higher R_X were found to use higher-threat politeness strategies than languages with a lower R_X, which was predicted by the formula. Akan and Japanese exclusively used off-record strategies, whereas Finnish and English used additional lower-threat strategies such as minimising the imposition and jokes.

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4   http://www.mum.org/words.html.
5   https://helloclue.com/articles/culture/top-euphemisms-for-period-by-language.
6   See Footnote 3.
7   This was highly variable and often an estimation. More about this is discussed in section 4.1.
8   Unfortunately, due to limited resources and access to comprehensive linguistic references for the Akan language, glosses for the Akan examples provided in this study are not available.

4.1 Akan results

25 out of 25 expressions employed mitigation strategies correctly predicted by the formula. In all cases, the formula predicted a W_X of 4, and all expressions used metaphor and vagueness, which are off-record strategies mitigating a high-threat FTA. The following expressions are examples of metaphor (3) and vagueness (4) in Akan euphemisms:

(3) *bukyia mu afɔ*

     'the hearth is wet'

(4) *ne nsa kɔn'akyi*

     'her hand has gone to her back'

4.2 British English results

17 out of 25 expressions employed mitigation strategies correctly predicted by the formula. In most cases, the formula predicted a W_X of 3 or 4 due to the less taboo nature of menstruation in the UK, and overall lower social distance and power imbalance between speakers and hearers. As a result, correctly predicted expressions mostly utilised negative politeness strategies (threat level 3) such as minimising the imposition, and off-record strategies such as metaphor and vagueness. Some expressions used jokes, which is a positive politeness strategy (threat level 2), but these expressions were still determined as correctly predicted if the joke was within a metaphor. For example, the following phrase is first a metaphor which is also humorous:

(5) Arsenal are playing at home

Two out of 25 expressions employed strategies not predicted by the formula. The expressions in (6a) and (6b) are typically used between female friends, where P and D are both low. However, both expressions use metaphor, which is a high-threat mitigation strategy. In these cases, the formula predicted a higher-threat strategy than was used.

(6) a. my friend
     b. red fairy

Six out of 25 expressions were dysphemisms[9] rather than euphemisms, and therefore impolite. In these cases, the speaker defied politeness expectations and did

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[9] X-phemismistic theory expresses dysphemisms as similar but opposite to euphemisms; where euphemisms are positive and harmless, dysphemisms are negative and offensive. Additionally, orthophemisms are literal and neutral (Allan & Burridge 2006).

not use mitigation strategies, which could not be predicted by the formula. These expressions are as follows:

(7) a. on the blob

   b. having the rags on

   c. crimson tide

   d. red wedding[10]

   e. blowjob time

   f. the curse

4.3 Japanese Results

24 out of 25 expressions employed strategies correctly predicted by the formula. Similar to Akan, because of the very high R_X of discussing menstruation, the formula consistently predicted the use of at least level 4 mitigation strategies. As predicted, expressions exclusively utilised the off-record strategies of metaphor and vagueness. Some of these expressions were humorous, but again these were considered correctly predicted as they were primarily metaphors rather than jokes. For example, the expression in (8) is a metaphor but is also considered humorous:

(8) お客様
    okyakusama

    'guest'

Only one expression used an incorrectly predicted strategy, however, the threat level was only one below what the formula predicted. The expression in (9) was classed as employing the level 3 strategy 'minimising the imposition', although the formula predicted a W_X of 4. It does, however, utilise indirectness, which characterises level 4 strategies:

(9) 月
    getsuichi

    'once a month'

4.4 Finnish results

15 out of 25 expressions employed strategies correctly predicted by the formula. Similar to English, these expressions utilised medium-threat strategies to mitigate a predicted W_X of 3 to 4. Four out of 25 expressions used incorrectly predicted strategies. These expressions (10a-10d) all used metaphor or vagueness, which is a higher threat strategy than the predicted W_X of 2-3 would suggest:

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[10] Referring to a scene of mass murder in the Game of Thrones franchise.

(10) a. *hillo-viiko-t*
          jam-week-PL

          'the jam weeks'

      b. *nähdä   punaista*
          see-INF red-PART

          'to see red'

      c. *punaise-t päivä-t*
          red-PL   day-PL

          'the red days'

      d. *se   aika kuu-sta*
          that time moon-ELATIVE

          'that time of the month'

Five out of 25 expressions were dysphemisms rather than euphemisms. These included:

(11) a. *hullu-n   lehmä-n tauti*
          crazy-GEN cow-GEN disease

          'mad cow disease'

      b. *olla   hai-n-syötti-nä*
          be-INF shark-GEN-bait-ESSIVE

          'to be shark bait'

      c. *paha-t   päivät*
          bad-PL day-PL

          'the nasty days'

      d. *rätti-viiko-t*
          rag-week-PL

          'the rag weeks'

      e. *känkkä-ränkkä-päivä*
          whiney-riney-day

          'the whiny days'

One expression was an orthophemism (see Footnote 9). This is slang which is short for *menstruaatio* (menstruation) but was classed as bald on-record (threat level 1) since the terms are shortenings of the word menstruation rather than substitutes, so should not be classed as euphemisms:

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(12)   *menkat/menskat/mensut*

       'menstruation' (shortened)

5 Discussion

Overall, the results suggest that Politeness Theory can explain the motivation for using politeness strategies when discussing menstruation as a means of mitigating an FTA, but the formula cannot consistently accurately predict the choice of strategy in both Western and non-Western languages in more than 95% of menstrual euphemisms. The idea of menstruation as a taboo creates the need for mitigating the face threat of discussing it, and this appears to be universal. In this sense, we can argue that relying on euphemism to discuss menstruation is to maintain face, as Politeness Theory would claim. The results also validate Politeness Theory's claim that the more threatening the FTA, the higher level strategy is required to mitigate it. This is shown by the more frequent use of higher-level mitigation strategies in Japanese and Akan, which consider menstruation to be more of a taboo. This again provides more evidence for the claim that politeness can be explained in terms of mitigating FTAs, and that menstruation is a high-threat FTA in Japanese and Ghanaian culture.

However, the formula did not correctly predict the choice of politeness strategy in over 95% of euphemisms in all four languages, only correctly predicting the strategies in a sufficient number of expressions in the two cultures where menstruation was considered a higher-threat FTA. The two non Western languages, Japanese and Akan, were correctly predicted by the formula, whereas the two Western languages, British English and Finnish, were not. Interestingly, this is contrary to typical criticisms of the universality of Politeness Theory, which critique its supposed Eurocentricity and Western views of politeness. The fact that the formula better predicted non-Western politeness may provide evidence against the Eurocentricity critique, but nevertheless maintains that Politeness Theory cannot be universally applied. Perhaps the universality issue is not with Western versus non-Western attitudes toward politeness, but rather with extending the formula to wider, less typical examples of politeness such as discussing menstruation. Typical examples of politeness such as requests and criticisms are more socially prescribed than this, and even within cultures and social groups, personal comfort with menstruation will affect how a speaker discusses it. Therefore, the restrictive nature of the formula is likely unable to account for such personal differences and social nuances.

The primary question that arises from these results is why Western languages were incorrectly predicted. There were two aspects of Western euphemisms which were not predicted by the formula: dysphemisms and jokes. Dysphemisms can be used to offend (Allan 2012), which would not be expected when discussing a taboo topic which is already considered offensive. However, dysphemisms are expected in groups which display a high degree of stigmatisation to a topic (Vancauwenbergh & Franco 2023), which would account for the high number of dysphemisms in British English, but does not explain their use in Finnish, or lack of use in Akan

and Japanese. This is likely a cultural choice that cannot be explained by Politeness Theory but would be difficult to fit into a universal account of politeness. The culture of 'banter' in the United Kingdom, for instance, calls for the use of dysphemisms and dysphemistic euphemisms[11] (Terry 2020), but as such a culture does not exist – at least to the same extent – in Finland, the use of these phrases cannot yet be adequately explained.

The use of humour in Western languages is somewhat expected, since it is often used to help the speaker cope with discussing a taboo topic (Jackson & Falmagne 2013), and Brown & Levinson (1987) list it as a politeness strategy to help put the hearer at ease. However, Politeness Theory cannot explain why the use of humour differs between the languages, and why Western cultures use humour more than non Western cultures. Again, this is a critique of Politeness Theory's universality but not its Eurocentricity and demonstrates the difficulty of determining a universal account of politeness to deal with these cultural differences.

It may be important to consider that most expressions analysed in this study are metaphorical and therefore instantiate different schemas. Some are conventional and widespread cross-culturally – expressions relating to 'time of the month' appeared in English, Finnish, and Japanese – but there are also some novel metaphors. This distinction is important for assessing universality; clearly there is some universality in the expressions used by cultures regardless of the attitudes toward menstruation, but the allocation of specific politeness strategies in various situational contexts can be exploited in different ways and to a different degree. It may be fruitful to concentrate on novel expressions to further explore and define cultural differences in the application of politeness to a taboo topic such as menstruation.[12]

In the same vein, the results show that higher-threat mitigation strategies such as metaphor and vagueness were consistently used across languages, even when the R_X differed. In Finnish and British English for example, metaphor and vagueness were used frequently, and sometimes incorrectly, according to the formula. If the formula were correct, these strategies would not be used at all in places such as Finland where discussing menstruation is comparatively less threatening, yet they are used regardless. Using metaphor and vagueness appears to be a universal choice that occurs regardless of what the formula may predict. This is likely because euphemisms very often contain metaphors; there are few euphemisms that do not. And, since euphemism is commonly utilised when discussing taboo topics, this choice may have less to do with politeness and more with linguistic or societal standards

6 Concluding Remarks

This study concludes that Politeness Theory can successfully explain the universal motivation behind using politeness strategies to discuss menstruation, however it more successfully predicted the choice of strategy in non-Western than Western

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[11] A term which is supposed to be offensive, but the speaker's intention is not to cause offence (Allan & Burridge 2006).

[12] Many thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising the points discussed in this paragraph.

languages. This therefore demonstrates a lack of universality, but not a Western bias, as has been frequently argued. Additionally, the formula could not predict the use of dysphemisms and humour in Western languages, nor the fact that higher-threat strategies were consistently used despite the varying R_X. For Politeness Theory to successfully account for menstrual euphemisms across cultures, the formula must be amended to be less restrictive. However, the results from this study provoke the question of the feasibility of a universal account of politeness which can explain atypical examples of politeness and account for personal social differences.

6.1 Limitations

This study is not without its limitations. First, P and D were difficult to calculate without native knowledge of the languages, and due to the contextual nature of the sociological variables, were often estimated in the analysis of the expressions. This may have led to falsely determined correct or incorrect predictions. If this study were to be repeated, informants who are native speakers of each language could be consulted, to better understand the context within which the expressions are used.

Next, the corpus was made up of only 25 expressions for each language. The reason for this was that Agyekum (2002) only listed 25, so I took this article as my point of reference. I acknowledge that this is a limited number, and more expressions would have provided a deeper insight into the politeness strategies used. I was, however, bound by space and time constraints, but future study on the topic would include a higher number of expressions.

Finally, some expressions were difficult to classify as either a dysphemistic euphemism or a dysphemism. For example, the Finnish phrase *hullun lehmän tauti* (mad cow disease) is a clear dysphemism, but another phrase in the same language *hilloviikot* (the jam weeks) has a negative connotation but was classed as a euphemism. Classification was kept as consistent as possible, but some expressions may have been incorrectly classified.

6.2 Opportunities for further research

This study did not take age or gender into account, again due to space constraints, but since age significantly contributes to variation in attitudes toward menstruation Chrisler (1988), this should be considered in the future. It could be the case that the incorrectly predicted expressions which utilised dysphemisms are used by younger speakers and therefore more impolite, but older speakers may conform more closely to traditional politeness expectations.

Additionally, to further contribute to the universality debate, this study should be repeated according to a different politeness framework which claims universality, such as Leech's (2007) Grand Strategy of Politeness. It may be the case that a more recent framework can better account for less typical examples of politeness. In fact, Leech (1983: 2014) analysed banter and irony within the politeness framework, evaluating it as 'mock-impoliteness' conveyed by means of dysphemistic euphemisms

(Terry 2020). If this study were to be repeated according to Leech's framework, the outliers in Western languages may be better accounted for.

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APPENDICES

Language	Phrase	Translation/Explanation	X-Phemism	Speakers (P and D)	R_X of menstruation	Predicted W_X (1-5)	Actual Strategy Used	Correct Prediction?
Akan	aabu ne nsa	she has broken her hand	euphemism (negative)	female/female or female/male doctor (P/D low or high)	very high	4 or 5	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Akan	aate kokoniwa	she has hurt her toe	euphemism (negative)	older females (P/D low)	very high	4	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Akan	aay ɛbafan	she has been crippled	euphemism (negative)	older females (P/D low)	very high	4	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Akan	bukyia mu afɔ	the hearth is wet	euphemism (negative)	older females (P/D low)	very high	4	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Akan	aay ɛbasaa	she is bewildered	euphemism (negative)	older females (P/D low)	very high	4	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Akan	ante/ɔnnyina yie	she is not sitting/standing	euphemism (negative)	female/female or female/male doctor (P/D low or high)	very high	4 or 5	be vague; off-record (4)	yes
Akan	ɔnkɔgya ho	she does not go to the kitchen	euphemism (negative)	female/female or female/male doctor (P/D low or high)	very high	4 or 5	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Akan	ne nsa kɔn'akyi	her hand has gone to her back	euphemism (negative)	female/female or female/male doctor (P/D low or high)	very high	4 or 5	be vague; off-record (4)	yes
Akan	ɔnwe bosom so nam	she does not eat meat from the shrine	euphemism (negative)	older females (P/D low)	very high	4	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Akan	aakɔabankuam	she has gone to the parlour of the house	euphemism (negative)	older females (P/D low)	very high	4	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Akan	aakɔafikyire	she has gone behind the house	euphemism (negative)	female/female or female/male doctor (P/D low or high)	very high	4 or 5	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Akan	ɔnkɔahenfie	she does not go to the palace	euphemism (negative)	female/female or female/male doctor (P/D low or high)	very high	4 or 5	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Akan	ɔnkɔmkonnwafie so	she does not go to the stool room	euphemism (negative)	female/female or female/male doctor (P/D low or high)	very high	4 or 5	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Akan	ɔaba/ɔkɔnnaa fie/kuro mu	she has come/gone into women's house	euphemism (negative)	female/female or female/male doctor (P/D low or high)	very high	4 or 5	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Akan	aayi ne ho	she has shaved herself	euphemism (positive)	first menstruator/tribal queen mother (P high, D med)	very high	4	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Akan	aay ɛbra	she is of age	euphemism (positive)	first menstruator/tribal queen mother (P high, D med)	very high	4	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Akan	aakyima/way easakyima	she has flowered	euphemism (positive)	first menstruator/tribal queen mother (P high, D med)	very high	4	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Akan	ɔbaa no gyanma abere	the woman's gyanma fruit is ripe	euphemism (positive)	older females (P/D low)	very high	4	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Akan	ngo kɔkɔɔ afɔno/aba ne fie	red palm oil has soiled her/flowed into her	euphemism (positive)	older females (P/D low)	very high	4	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Akan	aahunu mogya	she has seen blood	euphemism (positive)	older females (P/D low)	very high	4	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Akan	aakum sono	she has killed an elephant	euphemism (positive)	older females (P/D low)	very high	4	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Akan	ɔkɔpo so	she has gone to the sea	euphemism (positive)	older females (P/D low)	very high	4	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Akan	aahuri asi	he has jumped and landed	euphemism (positive)	older females (P/D low)	very high	4	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Akan	akoa no abeduru	the man has arrived	euphemism (positive)	older females (P/D low)	very high	4	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes

Table 1 Akan data.

Language	Phrase	Translation/Explanation	X-Phemism	Speakers (P and D)	R_X of menstruation	Predicted W_X (1-5)	Actual Strategy Used	Correct Prediction?
English	I'm on/ I've come on		euphemism	female/female or female/male (P/D low or medium)	high	3 or 4	minimise imposition; negative (3)	yes
English	on the blob		dysphemism	male/male or male/female (P/D low or medium)	high	3 or 4	none; impolite	no
English	Arsenal are playing at home	Arsenal's colour is red	euphemism	female/male (P low, D medium)	high	3	metaphor: off-record (4) + joke; pos(2)	yes
English	flowers		euphemism	older female/younger female (P medium, D med)	high	4	metaphor: off-record (4)	yes
English	flying the (Japanese) flag		euphemism	male/male (P/D low)	high	3	metaphor: off-record (4) + joke; pos(2)	yes
English	having the rags on		dysphemism	male/male or male/female (P/D low)	high	3 or 4	none; impolite	no
English	having the (red) painters in		euphemism	male/male or male/female (P/D low or medium)	high	3 or 4	metaphor: off-record (4) + joke; pos(2)	yes
English	trooping the colour	red	euphemism	male/male or male/female (P/D low or medium)	high	3 or 4	metaphor: off-record (4) + joke; pos(2)	yes
English	my friend		euphemism	female/female (P/D low)	high	3	metaphor: off-record (4)	no
English	nosebleed		euphemism	female/male (P low, D medium)	high	3	minimise imposition; negative (3)	yes
English	red fairy		euphemism	female/female (P/D low)	high	3	metaphor: off-record (4)	no
English	womanlies		euphemism	older female/younger female (P medium, D med)	high	4	metaphor: off-record (4)	yes
English	shark week		euphemism	female/female (P/D low)	high	3	metaphor: off-record (4) + joke; pos(2)	yes
English	Aunt Flow is coming to visit		euphemism	female/female or female/male (P/D low or medium)	high	3 or 4	metaphor: off-record (4)	yes
English	time of the month		euphemism	anyone (P/D low-high)	high	3, 4, 5	minimise imposition: negative (3)	yes
English	the red badge of courage		euphemism	male/male or male/female (P/D low or medium)	high	3 or 4	metaphor: off-record (4) + joke; pos(2)	yes
English	moon time		euphemism	older females/younger females (P/D low)	high	4	metaphor: off-record (4)	yes
English	crimson tide		dysphemism	male/female (P/D medium)	high	4	metaphor: off-record (4) + joke; pos(2)	no
English	red wedding	game of thrones scene; mass murder	dysphemism	only amongst GoT fans (P/D low)	high	3	joke; impolite	no
English	mother nature's gift		euphemism	older females (P/D low)	high	3	minimise imposition: negative (3)	yes
English	blowjob time		dysphemism	male/male or girlfriend/boyfriend (P/D low or very low)	high	3 or 2	none; impolite	no
English	that/those		euphemism	female/female or female/male (P/D low or medium)	high	3 or 4	be vague; off-record (4)	yes
English	the curse		dysphemism	female/female or female/male (P/D low or medium)	high	3 or 4	metaphor: off-record (4)	no
English	in season		euphemism	older males and females (P/D medium)	high	4	metaphor: off-record (4)	yes
English	becoming a woman		euphemism	older woman/first menstruator (P/D medium)	high	4	metaphor: off-record (4)	yes

Table 2 English data.

Language	Phrase	Translation/Explanation	X-Phemism	Speakers (P and D)	R_X of menstruation	Predicted W_X (1-5)	Actual Strategy Used	Correct Prediction?
Japanese	月のもの 'tsukinomono'	the monthly things	euphemism	anyone, mostly women (P/D low-high)	very high	4 or 5	be vague; off-record (4)	yes
Japanese	女子の日 'joshi no hi'	girl's day	euphemism	anyone, mostly women (P/D low-high)	very high	4 or 5	be vague; off-record (4)	yes
Japanese	いらっしゃいませ 'irasshaimase'	welcome	euphemism	anyone, mostly women (P/D low-high)	very high	4 or 5	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Japanese	あの日 'ano hi'	the day of that	euphemism	anyone, mostly women (P/D low-high)	very high	4 or 5	be vague; off-record (4)	yes
Japanese	お客さん 'ogyakusan'	visitor	euphemism	anyone, mostly women (P/D low-high)	very high	4 or 5	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Japanese	血祭り 'chimatsuri'	blood festival	euphemism	anyone, mostly women (P/D low-high)	very high	4 or 5	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Japanese	ブルーデイ 'burudei'	blue day	euphemism	anyone, mostly women (P/D low-high)	very high	4 or 5	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Japanese	月— 'getsuichi'	once a month	euphemism	anyone, mostly women (P/D low-high)	very high	4 or 5	minimise imposition; negative (3)	no
Japanese	ガールズデイ 'garuzudei'	girl's day	euphemism	anyone, mostly women (P/D low-high)	very high	4 or 5	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Japanese	ペリー来航 peri raiko'	arrival of Matthew Perry	euphemism	younger females (P/D low)	very high	4	metaphor; off-record (4); joke; pos (2)	yes
Japanese	糸引き 'itohiki'	stretching out a string	euphemism	anyone, mostly women (P/D low-high)	very high	4 or 5	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Japanese	手なし 'tenashi'	handless/armless	euphemism	anyone, mostly women (P/D low-high)	very high	4 or 5	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Japanese	初事 'uigoto'	first thing	euphemism	anyone, mostly women (P/D low-high)	very high	4 or 5	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Japanese	月の物 'tsuki no mono'	moon thing	euphemism	anyone, mostly women (P/D low-high)	very high	4 or 5	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Japanese	初花 'hatsuhana'	first flower	euphemism	anyone, mostly women (P/D low-high)	very high	4 or 5	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Japanese	月立ちにけり 'tsuki tachinikeri'	the moon has risen	euphemism	anyone, mostly women (P/D low-high)	very high	4 or 5	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Japanese	月の障り 'tsuki no sawari'	moon obstacle	euphemism	anyone, mostly women (P/D low-high)	very high	4 or 5	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Japanese	あれ 'are'	that	euphemism	anyone, mostly women (P/D low-high)	very high	4 or 5	be vague; off-record (4)	yes
Japanese	いちごちゃん 'ichigo-chan'	little miss strawberry	euphemism	anyone, mostly women (P/D low-high)	very high	4 or 5	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Japanese	お客様 'okyakusama'	guest	euphemism	anyone, mostly women (P/D low-high)	very high	4 or 5	metaphor; off-record (4); joke; pos (2)	yes
Japanese	初潮 'shochou'	first tide	euphemism	anyone, mostly women (P/D low-high)	very high	4 or 5	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Japanese	ケッチャプ 'ketchappu'	ketchup	euphemism	anyone, mostly women (P/D low-high)	very high	4 or 5	metaphor; off-record (4); joke; pos (2)	yes
Japanese	アンネの日 'Anne no hi'	Anne's day (referring to Anne Frank)	euphemism	anyone, mostly women (P/D low-high)	very high	4 or 5	metaphor; off-record (4); joke; pos (2)	yes
Japanese	日の丸 'hi no maru'	rising sun	euphemism	anyone, mostly women (P/D low-high)	very high	4 or 5	metaphor; off-record (4); joke; pos (2)	yes
Japanese	生理 'seiri'	physiology	euphemism	anyone, mostly women (P/D low-high)	very high	4 or 5	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes

Table 3 Japanese Data.

Language	Phrase	Translation/ Explanation	X-Phemism	Speakers (P and D)	R_X of menstruation	Predicted W_X (1-5)	Actual Strategy Used	Correct Prediction?
Finnish	Hanna-täti käymässä	Aunt Hanna is visiting	euphemism	older people (P/D med/high)	medium	3 or 4	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Finnish	hedelmällisyystesti	the fertility test	euphemism	medical professionals (P high, D med)	medium	4	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Finnish	HIFK pelaa tänään	HIFK (Helsinki IFK) plays today	euphemism	female to boyfriend (P/D low)	medium	2 or 3	metaphor; off-record (4); joke; pos (2)	yes
Finnish	hilloviikot	the jam weeks	euphemism (neg)	male/female (P/D med/med)	medium	2 or 3	metaphor; off-record (4)	no
Finnish	hullun lehmän tauti	mad cow disease	dysphemism	male/female (P/D low/med)	medium	2 or 3	none; impolite	no
Finnish	huoltopäivä	the overhaul day	euphemism	older people (P/D med/high)	medium	4	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Finnish	Japanin lippu salossa	Japanese flag on the pole	euphemism (neg)	male/female (P/D low/med)	medium	2 or 3	metaphor; off-record (4); joke; pos (2)	yes
Finnish	ketsuppiviiko	ketchup week	euphemism (neg)	male/female (P/D low/med)	medium	2 or 3	metaphor; off-record (4); joke; pos (2)	yes
Finnish	kuukautiset	the monthlies	euphemism	anyone (P/D low/med)	medium	2 or 3	metaphor; off-record (4); minimise imposition; neg (3)	yes
Finnish	känkkäränkkäpäivä	whiny day	dysphemism	male/female (P/D low/med)	medium	2 or 3	metaphor; off-record (4)	no
Finnish	menkat, menskat, mensut	short for 'menstruatio' (menstruation)	orthophemism	anyone e.g. between friends (P/D low)	medium	2	be direct; bald on record (1)	no
Finnish	minulla on kuukautiset	I have my periods (formal)	euphemism	younger female/older or in workplace (P/D low/med/high)	medium	4	metaphor; off-record (4); minimise imposition; neg (3)	yes
Finnish	mondikset	the monthly thing	euphemism	anyone (P/D low/med)	medium	2 or 3	minimise imposition; negative (3)	yes
Finnish	munia	to lay eggs	euphemism	older people (P/D med/high)	medium	4	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Finnish	nähdä punaista	to see red	euphemism	menstruator/others (P/D med)	medium	3	metaphor; off-record (4)	no
Finnish	naisen paras päivä	woman's best day	euphemism	female/anyone (P/D low/med)	medium	2 or 3	metaphor; off-record (4); joke; pos (2)	yes
Finnish	ne	those	euphemism	when R_X is high and P/D are high	medium	4	be vague; off-record (4)	yes
Finnish	olla hainsyöttinä	to be shark bait	dysphemism	older people (P/D med/high)	medium	4	metaphor; off-record (4); joke; pos (2)	no
Finnish	Öljynvaihto	oil change	euphemism	older people (P/D med/high)	medium	4	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Finnish	pahat päivät	the nasty days	dysphemism	male/female (P/D low/med)	medium	2 or 3	metaphor; off-record (4)	no
Finnish	punaiset päivät	the red days	euphemism	female/friend or partner (P/D low)	medium	2	metaphor; off-record (4)	no
Finnish	rasti almanakassa	the mark in the calendar	euphemism	doctor/patient (P/D high)	medium	4	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes
Finnish	rättiviikot	rag weeks	dysphemism	friend/friend (male and female) (P/D med)	medium	3	metaphor; off-record (4)	no
Finnish	se aika kuusta	that time of the month	euphemism	used when P/D are med/high	medium	4	be vague; off-record (4)	no
Finnish	vuoto	the leak	euphemism	used when P/D are med/high	medium	4	metaphor; off-record (4)	yes

Table 4 Finnish Data.

Jessica Flack
The University of Cambridge
jlf70@cam.ac.uk