

# Euphemisms and their Translation Strategies (On the example of Georgian and English)

Lela Ebralidze

## Biography

Lela Ebralidze started her academic career at the Department of Foreign Languages and Translation at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University in 1999. At present she is conducting lecture courses for the MA programme “Translation and Intercultural Relations” teaching literary, juridical, academic translations, consecutive interpreting and the History of Translation in Georgia.

Associate Prof. Ebralidze is an author of the Georgian translations of English poetry published as *Lyrical Mosaics: British and American Poets*. Her English translations of Georgian poetry was published in the English version of the almanac *New Century*. She was involved in translating into English the epistles by his Holiness Catholicos Patriarch Ilia II.

Lela Ebralidze is an author of scholarly works on the translation, rhythm and polysemic issues of poetic images. She defended her doctoral dissertation in 2014 on *Poetic Image and its Transformation in Translation*.

## Abstract

*The present work deals with the problems related to translating euphemisms. It discusses the euphemisms of different categories and proposes the strategies for their translations. The emphasis is made on conveying the connotative meaning of the euphemistic expressions into the translation. Examples are recalled from the Georgian translations of English literary works.*

**Keywords:** *Euphemisms, National, Universal, Style, Connotation.*

**Translator’s note:** *The Georgian words used in this article as subjects of discussion are transliterated and italicized.*

The euphemisation of speech has a long history counting many centuries. The name “euphemism” originates from Greek *euphēmismós*, (*eu-* “good, well” and *phēmē* “speech”), we first meet it as early as in Homer and implies to an ancient custom according to which only the good words were supposed to be used in the process of sacrifice and saying the words of prayer.

Euphemisms have long become the subject of study for many areas and scholars worldwide. It is hard to add anything to the existed material. Yet, the present study aims to consider the

linguistic issue from the perspective of translation. However, before we move on to translation, it seems necessary to review briefly the meaning and types of euphemisms.

Hugh Rawson divides euphemisms in two categories – positive and negative [Rawson, 1998:492]. He selects the examples of positive euphemisms from the invented and optimized titles of various professions due to the solidarity to a particular member of society. These euphemisms include the use of environmental engineer instead of garbage collector, or replacing janitor by custodian etc... In Georgian the same applies to the use of the word stylist instead of a hairdresser or a barber; or the use of an office or administrative assistant instead of secretary etc...

The majority of euphemisms have negative connotations. Their goal is to spare the recipient, to provide the negative and unpleasant information about them in a more softened manner. We can see an example of this in Rawson's use of "low-income" instead of poverty. We can detect the similar approach in Georgian when somebody says "does not exist any more" (meaning death), behind the bars (in jail), intoxicated instead of drunken, overweighted instead of fat etc...

L. Samoskaite divides euphemisms into thematic groups in a rather interesting way [Samoskaite, 2011:13], which as a result, gives 6 groups:

1. Professional euphemisms: cleaning operator (referring to road sweeper/dustman), sanitation engineer (garbage man), meat technologist (butcher), beautician (hairdresser), domestic engineer (maid), undertaker/cemetery operator (gravedigger), call girl, sex worker (prostitute) etc... Similar euphemisms appear in Georgian such as burial organizer instead of a grave digger, call girl or sex worker instead of a prostitute etc...
2. The euphemisms related to health issues in English include the ones replacing cancer such as terminal illness, the big C, neoplasia, In Georgian we say long-term and "heavy" illness, incurable disease; Termination of pregnancy has replaced the word abortion. The medical term lethal/fatal outcome refers to the death of a patient. We should also mention mental patient, mentally ill instead of mad (in Georgian it is also spiritually ill instead of "crazy"). Likewise, the term physically challenged („*unarshezugduli*") sounds much gentler than a cripple, disabled, handicapped („*invalidi*", „*kheibari*").
3. Euphemisms referring to death and dying: This category is the most diverse. The euphemisms for the word dying in English include: to pass away, one's last breath, going to a better place, with the angels, join the majority, depart, meet his/her maker, feeling no pain, cross the bridge, resting in peace, go west, kick the bucket, bite the dust etc.. In Georgian we also have the words such as passed away „*gardaitsvala*"; he/she is no longer with us „*chventan aghar aris*"; entrusted his/her soul to the Lord „*suli ufals miabara*"; gave up his soul „*suli dalia*"; said farewell to life „*sicocxles gamoesalma*"; "closed" one's eye

„*tvali dakhucha*“, gone to bring salt „*tsavida marilze*“, fetched a letter „*tserili tsaigho*“ and lots of other expressions. Also some interesting euphemisms referring to death are found in *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*. For example: „Va, Satsutro bolod tavsas asudarebs-azetsarebs!” (716),<sup>4</sup> [Bolkvadze, 1997:40].

4. Euphemisms with sexual connotation: Widespread expressions indicating a sexual intercourse are: making love, doing it, sleeping with, knocking boots, burrying the bone, getting busy, making the beast with two backs, the last of which we see in Shakespeare. In the first scene of the first act in Othello Iago addresses Brabantio: “I am one, sir, that comes to tell you your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs”<sup>1</sup> (Georgian Translation by Ivane Machabeli: „*me aq imis satsnoblad gakhlavart, rom amzhamad tqveni qali da mavri ert-suls da ert-khortss pirutyvs tsarmoadgenen*”) [Shakespeare, 1954:268]. Georgian euphemisms usually say „*ertad tsola*“ (lying down together), „*ertad kofna/tskhovreba*” (Being/Living together), e.g. „*mas ghame fatman iama avtandils tana tsolita*“ (That night Fatman delighted herself by lying down with Avtandil) (1253) [Rustaveli, 1987:236].
5. The euphemisms indicating crime: gentleman of the road referring to a robber and a thief, behind bars („*Gisosebs mighma*” in Georgian), send somebody to glory – murder (in Georgian „*gasagheba*“), candy man – a drug dealer and to go high/ be in high refers to using/abusing drugs. The same in Georgian is „*Narkotikebis momkhmarebeli*” – drug user, „*narkodamokidebuli*” – drug addict, „*opioidebze damokidebuli*” opioid addict etc...
6. Political Euphemisms: this category is also quite diverse and it is more universal comparing with other categories. For example, manifestation instead of mass protest (in Georgian „*manifestatsia*“ (manifestation), instead of „*saprotesto gamosvla*“ (Protest march), collateral damage instead of civilian casualties (in Georgian – „*omis tanmdevi zarali*” or „*adamianuri zarali*“ instead of „*mskhverpli mshvidobian mosakhleobashi*“), departmental restructuring/reorganization replaced a more direct term such as staff reduction (in Georgian they also use „*reorganizatsia*“ instead of „*shemtsireba*“).

While speaking about Euphemisms, it is impossible to avoid mentioning a PhD dissertation by Maka Baladze [Baladze, 2015:33-43] that explores fundamentally the issues related to the use of euphemisms. Maka Baladze in her dissertation adds other three categories to the ones proposed by Samoskaite. To be more precise, she selects medical euphemisms, the euphemisms related to illnesses and physical deficiencies and also polite expressions.

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<sup>1</sup> literarydevices.net/euphemism

The mentioned work does not isolate the euphemisms of the religious nature even though their author talks about this issue in connection with taboo. It is interesting that the Georgian language does not have the euphemisms for God and in order to indicate our astonishment or shock we usually say „*ghmerto chemo!*“ (Oh, My God!) Whereas, in English instead of saying every time Oh, my God! God! or Jesus! They tend to switch between: “Gosh!” “Gee!” “Oh my gosh!” “golly!” “Oh my goodness!” As about the euphemisms referring to Satan, the English word devil is often replaced by the expressions such as: “god of this world”, “black man”, “black lad”, “black Sam”, “black spy”, “black gentleman”, “old Nick”, “old dad”, “old chap”, “old Roger”, “old smoker or old sooty”.<sup>2</sup>

In Georgian not too many words replace „*eshmaki*“ devil or „*satana*“ Satan. For example: „*matsduri*“ (tempter), „*utsminduri*“ (impure one), „*am kveknis ghmerti*“ (The god of this world). Moreover, the Georgian language does not mention the name of the Satan in as humourous and familiar way as does English. This is the case when the difference between the two cultures, the traditions of the two nations and their worldviews materialize. In such a case of translating the expressions which have no cultural equivalents in the target language we allow the principle of a so called “foreignization” or “alienation” and calquing the expression. For example in Georgian the English euphemisms for the Satan would sound like „*shaosani jentlmeni*“ (gentleman dressed in black) or „*shavi agenti*“ (black agent/spy), or even „*bneli semi*“ (dark Sam) or „*bneli rojeri*“ (dark Roger), which a reader could easily understand according to the context or maybe with the help of a footnote or a note.

Regarding the cultural differences we ought to mention that the most complex peculiarities in translation are provided by the lingual entities containing a national flavour. We should quote Prof. Dali Panjikidze who said “whatever is familiar and emotionally responsive for the native speaking translator, conveying it mechanically will produce something completely incomprehensible and emotionally dull” [Panjikidze, 1988:14]. When the original expressions lack the equivalent in the target language, such expressions may easily be considered as untranslatable. For example the commonly accepted euphemism in Georgia „*batonebi*“ (Sirs/masters), which, in Georgian refers to measles, chickenpox, whooping cough and similar infectious diseases. “According to the old religious custom, these diseases were caused by the small anthropomorphic entities, the so called “*batonebi*” (Sirs/masters) and every family they would visit would have a member affected by one of those diseases. People believed that “batonebi” liked music, dance, flowers, and sweets and if they fulfilled their wishes the disease would be cleared”.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> [digilib.k.utb.cz/bitstream/handle/.../jačková\\_2010\\_bp.pdf?](http://digilib.k.utb.cz/bitstream/handle/.../jačková_2010_bp.pdf?)

<sup>3</sup> <https://ka.wikipedia.org/wiki/ბატონები>

In English the above mentioned diseases are referred to as a group by the term viral exanthems (rashes) and all of them have their own names „*chutkvavila*“ – chicken-pox, „*kvavili*“ – smallpox, „*kbakura*“ – mumps etc... However, there is no equivalent to the Georgian euphemism „*batonebi*“ with the same connotation. Therefore, we think that in this case a translator is bound to provide the reader with an explanation in a footnote.

Let's remember the Georgian euphemisms for the word "snake" such as „*ukhsenebeli*“ (non-mentionable), „*mtsuravi*“ (swimmer/crawler), „*usakhelo*“ (unnamed), „*urtsmuno*“ (nonbeliever), „*tskeuli*“ (damned/cursed) etc... According to the Biblical tradition, God cursed the snake as a creature, the image of which was taken up by the devil in order to tempt Eve. [Jorjaneli, 1977:55]. The taboo applied to the snake in Georgian is likely to be originated from the superstition of our ancestors, who believed that pronouncing the name of this creature was calling the evil to them. In English however, there is neither a taboo about the snake, nor there are its euphemisms. The word snake is sometimes applied to a traitor and a liar. The word serpent is used in the Bible [Gen. 3:1–5]<sup>4</sup> and it has an additional meaning of the Satan. There is also another word viper which stands for a spiteful or treacherous person. Viper („*gvelgesla*“), as a slang, also refers to a cannabis smoker. Which one may better be used as an equivalent to the euphemism „*ukhsenebeli*“ (un-mentionable)? We should single out serpent among the three mentioned words for its association of the Satan being cursed by God. Yet, in order to keep the taboo, the best way out is to paraphrase the euphemism and create the variations such as speckled tempter („*chreli*“, „*datsintskluli*“, „*matsduri*“ etc), cursed hisser („*datskevlili mosisine*“), cursed creeper („*datskevlili mtsotsavi*“) etc...

During the translation process lot less complexities are posed by universal euphemisms or the terms, that we meet in many different languages. For example: undocumented immigrant („*binadrobis nebartvis armqonde utskhoeli*“) instead of saying illegal alien („*aralegaluri imigranti*“); beyond poverty limit („*sigharibis zgvars mighma*“); socially vulnerable („*sotsialurad dautsveli*“); Balzac age („*balzakis asaki*“); senior citizen („*ufrosi asakis adamiani*“); autumn of life („*tskhovrebis shemodgoma*“) etc...

Besides the specific national nuance, the differences between the connotative meanings of expressions are also results of the fact that they belong to different stylistic layers. Let's look at the English euphemisms referring to death and dying. Majority of them are stylistically neutral: departed this life, went to a better place, lost one's life, is not with us anymore etc... There are also numerous verbal expressions: buy the farm, go west, kick the bucket, turn up one's toes etc... Some euphemisms are considered as slangs as well. For example: assume room temperature, go home in a box, swimming with concrete shoes. We may also see

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/>

euphemisms of Official bookish and elevated character. For example: pass away (official), one's hour has come (academic), go to one's final place of rest (elevated) etc.<sup>5</sup>

Stylistic differences can be traced among the Georgian euphemisms. Some of them correspond directly to English expressions/euphemisms such as „*sitsotskhles gamosalmeba*“ – saying farewell to life; „*sulis amokhdoma*“ – give up one's soul; „*pekhebis fapsheka*“ – stretch one's legs; „*gardatsvaleba*“ – pass away, transform; „*tsali pekhi samareshi aqvs*“ – to have one foot in a grave; „*aghar aris*“ – is no longer with us; „*misi agsaruslis dge dadga*“ – one's hour [day] has come.

As about other expressions, considering that most of them are idiomatic it is enough to look for the expressions with corresponding meanings during the translation. To quote Prof. Givi Gachechiladze on the idioms which had specifically national character, they as a rule, cannot be translated literally and in this case we must look for analogies, or they should be built in such a way as to be used and spread afterwards“. [Gachechiladze, 2014:238]. Yet, these expressions ought to coincide with the original by connotation as well as stylistically. It is easy to achieve in the case of the expressions related to death and dying since we have the all kinds of expressions in both languages. According to this logic, the expressions of conversational style go to the farm, fall off one's perch, go west, kick the bucket can be translated as „*gavida gaghma marilze*“, „*tserili tsaigho*“, „*fekhebi gafshika*“ etc., while the euphemisms corresponding more to a more elaborate style could be „*suli upals miabara*“ (entrusted one's soul to the Lord), „*aghesrula*“ (ended), „*imkveknad gaemgzavra*“ (left for the other world) etc...

Considering all this it seems slightly odd the choice of words used by the Georgian-English and English-Georgian online dictionary translate.ge that claims the Georgian equivalents to the English expression pass away to be the euphemisms such as „*pekhis gachimva*“ or „*pekhis gapsheka*“ (stretching one's leg), or even „*sulis gapva*“ (letting out one's last breaths). It is true that it also mentions the words such as „*mitsvaleba*“ and „*gardatsvaleba*“, but it is likely that the above mentioned expressions should not be put side by side on the same line.

Unfortunately, translating the connotation precisely often causes mistakes and awkwardness. Frequent complaints have been made against the translations of foreign fictional literature and movies on the grounds of using wrong euphemisms in translations. Let us remember how comical is the sound of the widespread „*eshmakma dalakhvros*“ (damn it!) when it is used as an equivalent to certain English scabrous expressions. Sometimes, the translator himself/herself takes the liberty to offer vulgar expressions or slang as equivalents to some neutral expressions. This is a very sensitive issue since every language has its own unique verbal norms and means of expression; therefore, what does not hurt our ears in one

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<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/.../List\\_of\\_expressions\\_related\\_to\\_death](https://en.wikipedia.org/.../List_of_expressions_related_to_death)

language, may seem extremely vulgar in the other. Therefore, it is necessary to neither soften the expressions too much, nor to translate them literally. A translator ought to find a word or an expression, which will provoke the emotions and associations in reader in the target language that produce the closest associations to the word's original meaning.

Let us recall a few examples from the Georgian translations of English literature. We may consider a few sentences from Jerom David Sallinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* „*Tamashi Chvavis Kanashi*“ in the translation by V. Chelidze, and „*kldis pirze chvavis kanashi*“ (By the Edge of the Rock in the Rye) in the translation by G. Chumburidze:

„Anyway, it was December and all, and it was cold as a witch's teat, especially on top of that stupid hill. I only had on my reversible and no gloves or anything. The week before that, somebody'd stolen my camel's-hair coat right out of my room.... Pencey was full of crooks... The more expensive a school is, the more crooks it has – I'm not kidding. Anyway, I kept standing next to that crazy cannon, looking down at the game and freezing my ass off.“<sup>6</sup>

The translation by Vakhtang Chelidze sounds like this in Georgian:

„*erti sitkvit, dekemberi idga, tsioda – dzagli ar gaigdeboda karshi. Tsarmoidginet, ra suskhi iqneboda im idiotur gorakze ... me ki kurtukis amara videqi, arc tatmanebi, arc jandaba da dozana, stsores erti kviris tsin amtsapna vighacam chemi otakhidan aklemis betsvi qurqi ... jibgirebit aris gamotenili pensi... rac ufro dzvirfasiania skola, mit met hibgirs naxa iq... ghmertmani. Erti sitkvit, im dafkhavebuli zarbaznis gverdit videqi, mindors gadavkurebdi da sicivisagan ukanali metsoda*“ [J. Sallinger 1969:8].

Let us look now at the new translation by Gia Chumburidze:

„*akhla, dekemberi iko d aim dedaimasqnebul goraze ise tsioda, rogorc dedabris ubeshi. Me kide marto anoraki mqonda tsamoghebuli da arts kheltatmanebi da arts araferi. Tsina kviras sakutari otakhidan amtsapnes chemi jila aklemis betsviani qurtuki... rame rom ikos, es chveni pensi batsnebitaa savse... rac ufro dzviriania skola, mit meti batsana xvdeba iq, me geubnebit, mokled, vzivar am nashtis dzvelis didebisa tana, tamashs tvals vadevneb da kaklebi metosheba*“ [J. Sallinger 2006:7-8].

Let us start with a comparison. The idiomatic expression “it was cold as a witch's teat” has its own history, which takes us back as far as in the middle ages when people used to be executed for their alleged contact with “evil” spirits. However, its etymology is no longer interesting to us now. The main thing is that we have to deal with idiomatic expressions

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<sup>6</sup> J.D. Salinger *The Catcher in the Rye*, pg 5 [www.readanybook.com/online/2055](http://www.readanybook.com/online/2055)

while it is not necessary to translate them literally, it is rather better to find the expressions with similar connotations in the target language of the final translation.

Since the given idiom refers to cold weather, we find more acceptable the translation by Vakhtang Chelidze that finds a Georgian expression as expressing a similar idea „*dzagli ar gaigdeboda karshi*“ (meaning that a weather was so bad that it would have been pity to let a dog out in the street). As about the other translation by Gia Chumburidze that says „*ise tsioda, rogorts dedabris ubeshi*“ (meaning it was so cold as in an old lady’s bosom) – he obviously tried to translate literally, at the same time he softened it and as a result we got a translation which sounds very unnatural in Georgian. Besides, the translator has used a rather impolite word „*dedaimasqnebuli*“ (form of swearing) where in the original we have a completely neutral word “stupid”. We believe that the words such as „*batsnebi*“, „*amtsapnes*“, „*kaklebi metosheba*“, express very well the manner of talking of an young man and it sounds quite natural in Georgian too. Yet, it is strange that he is using a rather archaic phrase „*Nashtis dzvelis didebisa tana*“ to stand for crazy custom. It is likely that the translator allowed it for having an ironic effect but we do not find anything like it in the original.

We find the Chelidze’s addition of „*Jandaba and dozana*“ unnecessary. To convey the word ass by the euphemism is acceptable yet it can be arguable. Chumburidze in this case gives a more natural expression. We also find the use of the word „*gmertmani*“ out of the context and regard it as incompatible with the speech of the main character of the novel.

We also want to bring another example from the play by Tennessee Williams *A Streetcar Named Desire* (The title translated into Georgian by G. Jabashvili – „*tramvai, romelsats sakhelad “survili” hqvია*“; The translation by L. Inasaridze calls it „*tramvai saxelad survili*“).

One of the main characters of the play, Stanley Kowalski tells about his sister in law: “The trouble with Dame Blanche was that she couldn’t put on her act any more in Laurel! They got wised up after two or three dates with her and then quit, and she goes on to another, the same old line, same old act, same old hooey! But the town was too small for this to go on forever! And as time went by she became a town character. Regarded as not just different but downright loco – nuts.... And for the last year or two she has been washed up like poison.” [Williams, 1986:100].

Let us consider two available translations. The one by G. Jabashvili this episode is conveyed this way:

„am chven turfას მთელი უბედურება ის არის, რომ ლოელში სე ვერ გაშალა ფეხი, როგორც ტვიტონ ნეხავდა. კვლამ მალე გაუგო, რა ჩიტის ბრძანებობა და ert-ორჯერ რომ თსკონდებობნენ, მერე ჯურგს უბრუნებდნენ. ეს კი გადიოდა კხელიდან კხელში და ისევე არ ერეებოდა არაფერს და არავის! მაგრამ ამისთანა კოროჩინა ღალაღში განა რამე დაიმალე? მალე კვლას პირზე ეკერა



magisi sakheli, radgan mteli qalaqis madly moiskha... am ukanaskneli ori tslis ganmavlobashi ki magar bozad miachnda kvelas, da magari kukuc hkres iqidan“ [Williams, 2006:84].

The translation by L. Inasaridze puts it this way:

*„lorelshi ise hqonia tavi mochrili, rom titit sachvenebeli gamkh dara. Erti-orjer tu chaitsvendnen loginshi da mere kargad mekole. Khelidan khelshi gadadioda da kvelastan erts da imave komedias tamashobda – vitom ar unda, vitom idzulebulia. Loreli patara dabaa, es dagnari didkhans ver gagrdzeldeboda. Tavdapirvelad chkuasusti hgonebiat, soflis gizhi... bolo ori tselia – medzavi“* [Williams, 2013: 78-79].

The original text uses a completely neutral word as a reference to the amorous adventures. G. Jabashvili translated this word with an euphemism *„tskhondebodnen“*, which, considering the context obviously implies to the lifestyle of Blansch. This reference is even more supported by another euphemism – „mteli kalakis madly moiskha“ (meaning she obliged the whole town). Inasaridze is more straightforward while saying – „chaitsvendnen loginshi“ (meaning they took her in bed), yet, this expression is also an euphemism. Stanley Kowalski says about Blansch that she became a town character, and afterwards she was considered as downright loco – nuts, in the end though, they got rid of her as immoral and a corrupt influence. Tennessee Williams expresses his opinion about the latter: “And for the last year or two she has been washed up like poison”. Washed up is usually said about a person whose career is over and is going to have no chance.<sup>7</sup> The same verb can be translated as *„chamoretshva“*, *„tavidan moshoreba“*, *„chamotsera“*.

As about an association like poison, this artistic trick is used for emphasizing the fact that during the last few years Blansch was considered to be dangerous and harmful for society – something that destroys, corrupts, etc.<sup>8</sup>

In Georgian translation there are no such comparisons. Gabashvili’s translation even misses out completely the fact that people thought of her as mentally disturbed, he only says so: *„am ukanaskneli ori tslis ganmavlobashi ki magar bozad miachnda kvelas da magari kukuts hkres iqidan“*. Inasaridze’s translation is more accurate: *„tavadpirvelad chkuasusti hgonebiat, soflis gizhi... bolo ori tselia – medzavi“*. Yet, this translation also parts from the original not by the content but by the content.

The problem is that Tennessee Williams allows his characters to say rude words without hesitation when he finds it necessary. Yet, in any case he conveys his message applying a figurative method of literary comparison. Translators, meanwhile decided to make their job easier and they lost “poison” as an image and its components as bitterness, death, perfidy, unseen danger... when they could offer the translation like this: *„da bolo erti-ori tselia*

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<sup>7</sup> [dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/washed-up](http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/washed-up)

<sup>8</sup> [www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/poison](http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/poison)

*rogorts satsamlavs, ise eridebian* (“and during the last couple of years they avoid her as a poison”) or *„... akhlosats aghar ikareben, rom taviis uzneobit qalaqi ar tsabiltso* (“and they do not let her near them as a precaution for her defiling the whole town by her immorality”).

Thus, relying on all the above mentioned we may conclude that in the process of translating euphemisms one needs to distinguish whether we are dealing with the lingual entities bearing imprints of national identity or universal expressions, the stylistic layer of which belongs to this or that euphemism. Therefore, that strategy of translation has to be selected, which will have the same emotional impact on the recipient as did the original on its reader.

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