

The Usage Of Taboos In English: Linguistic-Cultural And Communicative Functions

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Abstract: This paper examines the usage of taboo language in English from a sociolinguistic perspective. Taboos refer to words, expressions or topics that are culturally restricted or considered inappropriate in certain social contexts. The study applies a qualitative literature-based analysis to identify common types of taboo topics, including bodily functions, sexuality, death, religion and discriminatory expressions. It also explores the social and communicative functions of taboo language, such as expressing emotion, reinforcing group identity, signalling informality, and managing politeness through avoidance or euphemism. Findings indicate that taboo usage in English is strongly dependent on cultural norms, setting, gender, age and interpersonal relationships. The study concludes that taboo language is not merely a form of linguistic impurity but an integral component of communication that carries emotional and social meaning. Understanding taboo usage is particularly important for language learners and educators to avoid miscommunication and cultural offense.

Keywords: Taboo language, sociolinguistics, euphemism, english language, communication, speech norms, pragmatics, cultural language use.

Introduction: Taboo language refers to words, expressions or topics that are socially restricted, avoided, or treated as unacceptable in certain contexts., “taboo language refers to words and phrases that are generally considered inappropriate in certain contexts like polite or formal settings”. The concept of taboo more broadly stems from the ethnographic term “tapu” in Polynesian languages meaning “forbidden, inviolable, sacred”. In English usage, taboo topics often include bodily functions, sex, death/illness, religion/blasphemy, discriminatory slurs, profanity and more. As research shows, what is taboo is shaped by cultural, social, register and contextual factors.

METHODS

The study uses a qualitative literature-review and thematic analysis approach. Specifically: A review of peer-reviewed articles, books, and chapters on taboo language in English (definitions, forms, social functions). For example, the paper “A Sociolinguistic Study of English Taboo Language” provides a classification and survey of taboo in English. Extraction of categories of taboo from the literature (e.g., bodily functions, religion, death) and illustrative examples.

Analysis of communicative and socio-cultural functions of taboo language: emotional regulation, identity formation, group bonding, intensification, euphemism, etc. This uses sources such as “Taboo Language and Norms in Sociolinguistics. Consideration of contextual/ speaker-listener variables: gender, age, formality, culture, second language learner status. For example, differences in male and female use of taboo language.

RESULTS

The thematic analysis of the literature reveals several key findings:

1. Categories of taboo topics and language

Taboo language in English clusters around several major domains:

Bodily functions/excretions, sex, private parts. Many English taboo words refer to defecation, genitals these are often avoided in formal/polite settings. For instance, the paper by “A Sociolinguistic Study of English Taboo Language” outlines such categories. Death, illness and disease. Some topics (death, grave, illness) are managed by euphemisms (“pass away” instead of “die”).

Religion, blasphemy, sacred names. Religious

expletives or use of sacred names in vain are often taboo or restricted. Discriminatory language (slurs, insults), profanity and obscenity. The literature emphasises that taboo words often carry strong emotional charge and may function as insults or expletives. Naming taboos and avoidance. While more prominent in anthropological contexts, there is a linguistic dimension: lexical avoidance or replacement of taboo-words.

2. Communicative and social functions of taboo usage

From the literature several functions emerge: Emotional expression / intensification. Taboo words often serve to vent strong emotions, intensify a message, or function as exclamations. For example, the multi-lab study across languages found that taboo words are characterised by very low valence (negative) and very high arousal. Group bonding / identity marking. Use of certain taboo or “in-group” language can signal membership, solidarity, or informality among peers. Some studies show how taboo usage varies by group, gender and setting. Politeness and social regulation through avoidance. The avoidance of taboo words (or the use of euphemisms) signals social distance, formality, respect or adherence to social norms. As states: the “definition of taboo language depends on cultural norms, not the words themselves being inherently bad”.

3. Contextual patterns and regulating factors. The usage or avoidance of taboo language depends on a variety of factors:

Cultural variation. What is taboo varies significantly across societies. Register/Setting/Formality. Formal settings (professional, academic, religious) typically demand avoidance, while informal settings allow more taboo usage. The paper “Taboo Language on the Internet” shows that in online chatrooms behaviours differ. Speaker/listener variables. Gender, age, socio-economic background and language proficiency matter. For instance, the article “Taboo Language and Norms in Sociolinguistics” reports that men tend to use more taboo words than women, and women who use taboo words may be socially judged more negatively.

Second-language learners. Learners of English may struggle with taboo language: its use, evaluation and social consequences. The study “Pragmatic knowledge and subjective evaluation in the...” shows that L2 learners might not fully grasp taboo norms.

DISCUSSION

The above findings have several implications for our understanding of taboo usage in English.

First, the persistence of taboo language in everyday interaction (despite social restrictions) indicates that

taboo is not simply a barrier to communication but plays a functional role in discourse. The fact that taboo words serve functions like emotional venting, identity construction and intensification suggests they are integral to human communicative behaviour. The multi-lab study shows taboo words have distinctive affective-semantic features (very low valence, high arousal) which help explain their usage.

Second, taboo usage highlights the interplay between language and culture. What counts as taboo is culturally determined, and learning a language includes learning its taboo conventions. For learners of English, understanding taboo vocabulary, euphemism strategies and social appropriateness is important failure to do so may lead to social offence or misunderstanding. The L2 learners’ study supports this.

Third, from a pedagogical/communicative viewpoint, awareness of taboo and its social regulation is critical. Language teaching often emphasises polite/formal registers and may neglect taboo registers, yet taboo registers (slang, expletives, informal speech) are part of authentic communication. Educators should consider how to teach learners about taboo usage, when it is appropriate or not, and how to navigate contexts.

Fourth, taboo usage also drives language change via euphemism, lexical replacement and semantic shift. The notion of the “euphemism treadmill” (words that start as euphemisms become taboo and get replaced again) applies. For example: “toilet” replaced “privy-house”, then “washroom”, etc. Wikipedia’s entry on euphemism describes this process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study is based on secondary literature, so it lacks new empirical data (e.g., corpus counts of taboo word frequencies, experimental studies of taboo word impact). Future research could include quantitative corpus studies comparing taboo usage across registers, cultures and age groups, or experiments measuring how taboo words affect listeners.

In application, language educators and communicators might integrate modules on taboo language strategies: recognising taboo vocabulary, using euphemisms, understanding audience/context, choosing appropriate register. Such awareness can avoid social offence and enhance authentic communicative competence.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the usage of taboos in English is a multifaceted phenomenon spanning linguistic, cultural, social and communicative domains. Taboo words and topics are socially regulated but nonetheless play powerful roles in communication: expressing emotion, forging identity, marking informality or in-group status.

Understanding the categories of taboo topics, their communicative functions, and the contextual/regulatory frameworks that govern their use is crucial for linguists, educators, communicators and learners. Recognising that taboo language is not simply “bad” but functional helps us appreciate its place in human discourse and social life.

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