

Taboo Language and Norms in Sociolinguistics

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Abstract

This study aims to review related literature concerning the use of taboo words in societies. language is a transmitter of culture that shows sign system of words, sounds, and meanings that the members of a speech community use in order to cooperate with each other. In various cultures there are strong words namely taboos which counted as one aspect of social structure. Not many studies have been carried out on the area of taboo and its interpretation from sociolinguistics' perspectives in Iran. The researcher has been unable to find any studies having explored opinions and attitudes of Iranians and scholars towards English taboos. As a result, this study can be helpful in carrying studying in the field of discourse and sociolinguistics.

Keywords: culture, power, sociology, strong words, taboo

INTRODUCTION

In various cultures there are strong words namely taboos which are often associated with sex and sex organs, counted as one aspect of social structure, reflected in both language and action. It is worth noting that there is a magnificent variance among societies and within groups in a society in terms of use and perception of such strong language. One aspect of this variation is that it is assumed males and females are of varying perception of taboo words.

Kramsch (1998, p. 127) defines culture as "membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and a common system of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, and acting", i.e., cultural patterns are learned behaviors common to a society. Carter (1997) put it that culture can be deemed as people's traditions, history, values, and language that account for the culture of a group and which contribute to their identity. As language simultaneously illustrates and encodes social and cultural patterns, people need knowledge of culture in order to function decently in a particular society. In other words, the main use of language is to enable humans to express their social identity, social competence, as well as appreciation of different social situations and this social knowledge is essential for membership in a speech community (Romaine, 2000) .

People living in different countries and societies have varying constructs related to language and culture. The learned cultural concept of politeness formulae is a good

illustration of how cultures have different definitions of polite behavior, etiquette and norms in terms of acceptable degrees of directness and indirectness. What is polite behavior in one society may not necessarily be considered polite in another. The features of politeness do not have the same value across cultures and languages (Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper, 1989, Kasper 1990, Scollan and Wong-Scollan, 2001 and Wierzbicka, 1990).

taboo word use is turning to an increasingly socio-linguistic norm of society .Today, taboo words are used more and more in formal contexts such as parliaments and the media as well as by speakers of everyday informal conversations. It would appear that dirty words such as 'bugger', 'fuck' and 'shit' are transcending the social boundaries and are now linguistic resources available to speakers of both standard and non-standard languages.

Holmes (2001) contended it is widely accepted that individuals in a community share social criteria for language use such as rules of speaking, attitudes and values as well as socio-cultural understandings with regard to speech.

Individuals use taboo words every day more or less when and wherever needed nevertheless with hesitation and sometimes with hedges. The degree of offensiveness differs from culture to culture and society to society or gender to gender.

Not many studies have been carried out on the area of taboo and its interpretation from sociolinguistics' perspectives in Iran. The researcher has been unable to find any studies having explored opinions and attitudes of Iranians and scholars towards English taboos. As a result, this study can be helpful in carrying studying in the field of discourse and sociolinguistics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Taboo Definition

In etymological terms, the word 'taboo' has its root in Polynesian societies and generally refers to something that is socially, culturally, or religiously forbidden. Contemporary Longman Dictionary (2011) defines 'taboo' as one, which people avoid because it is extremely offensive or embarrassing. Taboo words are defined as words that many people consider offensive, shocking or repugnant for example because they refer to sex, the body or people's race.

Certain words in all societies are considered taboo. These special, "informal lexemes have been basic to our linguistic behavior for as long as we have been competent speakers" (Dumas and Lighter, 1978, p.16). These taboo words are a valid and indispensable part of language reflecting culture and the bodies are more likely to be regarded as taboos than others are.

In most societies, the most severe taboos are associated with words connected with sex and sex views of society. It is basically a universal phenomenon that certain parts of organs, "closely followed by those connected with excretion and the Christian religion" (Trudgill, 2000, p.19). Many taboo words heard in society today fall into a number of categories including taboo, obscenity, profanity, blasphemy, vulgarisms, and expletives

and cursing. While the terms are distinctively different, they can be all subsumed under the general umbrella of Taboo.

Taboo and Gender

Over the years, researchers have reported a number of language differences between the genders and for many years, it has been generally accepted that men and women do not speak similarly. Holmes (2001, p. 151) maintains “men and women do not speak in exactly the same way as each other in any community”. Women’s speech is different from men. As there are particular features that only turn out in the women’s speech or only in men’s such as differences in pronunciation, morphology expressions of uncertainty and politeness. In many speech communities across all social groups, women are thought to be more status-conscious than men are and generally use more formal, standard forms of speech. A number of sociolinguistic studies have suggested that women, irrespective of social characteristics such as class, or age, use more polite standard forms of language than their male counterparts (Romaine, 2000)

More recent feminist attitudes towards language and gender research have called into question the perception of women’s language (Bucholtz, Liang & Sutton, 1999). The simplistic nature of the dichotomized approach to language and gender research has been highly criticized by many researchers. They argue that the gender-language relationship is more complicated and context-specific than has been supposed. However, while researchers such as Stapleton (2003) cautioned against the generalized models of gendered speech styles, a review of the literature has shown that the notion of feminine and masculine speech is particularly salient in the area of earlier English taboo research. The traditional patterns of English taboos that are associated with gender have been greatly influenced by a number of researchers. Men used more taboo words than women, who in contrast, preferred to avoid this rough language (Otto Jespersen, 1922). It is in line with Well-known researcher Robin Lakoff’s (1975) statement that the stronger expletives are used by men, and the weaker ones by women.

Some researchers (e.g., De Klerk, 1992), regard women still stereotypically as guardians of the language and seen to be more ladylike and avoid dirty words in particular. Society’s social and cultural expectations vary regarding male and female taboo usage. Taboo has traditionally been regarded as aggressive and forceful and thus, it belongs to the language domain of males rather than females. Women’s speech, on the other hand, has generally been perceived as being polite, pure and sterile. Women’s subordinate social status in society is reflected in the taboo language women use. The idea that women should be lady like in their speech and their behavior can be seen as functioning as a form of social control (Hughes, 1992).

Johnson (1993, p. 4) carried out a study to explore gender and differences in the attitudes and beliefs of male and female American university students towards the use of English taboos and found out that women who used taboo words were evaluated more negatively than men and “a majority of both males and females reported a belief that college women who use taboo language are criticized for being unladylike” .However, although the majority of university students believed that taboo language should be equally

appropriate for both genders to use, his study ended in more traditional patterns of taboo use. The male respondents rated themselves as more frequent users of taboo language than females. Moreover, these males also report to use taboo language in more public places than their female counterparts did. This is in line with the findings of Selnow's study (1985) investigating gender differences of 135 undergraduate students (61 females and 74 males) in perceptions and use of English taboos. He found that the males in the study were more prolific users of taboo language compared to the females. In addition, the women reported having a lower opinion of taboo use on television and in formal settings compared to the males in the study .

A similar result was found in a more recent study conducted by Kocoglu (1996). He investigated the gender differences in the use of taboo words of 10 male and 10 female university students in Turkey. He concluded that men use strong taboo words while females use milder taboo words. Furthermore, men expect women to use fewer offensive expletives, while women predict men to use more offensive expletives

Sociolinguists have analyzed the effect of independent variables such as gender, age, and social class on the use of taboo words. Rayson *et al.* (1997) made a frequency analysis of vocabulary items in the conversational component of the British National Corpus. They found that males and speakers under 35 used more taboo words and that social class had nothing to do with the use of taboos.

The use and perception of taboo words have been investigated concerning both monolinguals and bilinguals. To see if taboo words would stand out from neutral words, Lieury *et al.* (1997) found that taboo words were four times greater than neutral words in long-term recall. In order to investigate independent variables such as sex, age, social class, generational gap and their effects on the use and frequency of taboo words sociolinguists have undertaken some studies albeit in short supply. Rayson *et al.* (1997) argue that age could have a far-fetching bearing on the use of expletives, on the other hand, social class could have no considerable effect.

Stenstorm (1995) observed no gender difference in choice and frequency of taboo words amongst teenagers but she found that boys use intensifiers (bloody, damn, fucking etc.) less often than girls but a broader set of taboo terms than girls. In an investigation by Bayard and Krishnayya (2001), New Zealand university students' taboo word usage was explored through qualitative analysis of casual unstructured dialogues and purpose-oriented and more structured conversation. Little gender difference in terms of severity of expletives was found. It also was noticed that females tend to swear less slightly than males. These studies indicate taboo words psycholinguistic stand out and their use is associated with sex and generational differences.

Thomas and Wareing (1999, p.102) explained that language allows speakers to communicate a "particular representation of the world" and it is "primarily through language that cultural values and beliefs are transmitted from one member of a society to another and from one generation to the next". The vocabulary of a language provides a reflection of the culture of the people who speak it. Thus, language and culture are two

of the most powerful symbols reflecting social behavior, both shape and are shaped by society to establish

Taboo Words and Conversational Power between Males and Females

Over years, numerous studies have been investigating men and women's speech. Researchers (Coates & Cameron, 1988; Coates, 1986; West & Zimmerman, 1983), state that generally the male conversational style is more aggressive than the female style and in many situations men interrupt women's speech. However, it is also argued that the use of taboo words by men reinforce status of strength and masculinity. Selnow (1985) rationalizes that the use of taboo word may contribute to the establishment of dominant and submissive roles in a relationship. In other words, males use taboo language as a strategy to take the control during coed interactions.

However, a number of studies are contrary to the widely-held view that taboo words are the domain of males and Coates (1986) holds that women employed in traditional male dominated professions resort to taboo words as an assertive strategy in coed conversations. Limbrick's study (1991) supports the claim that females are also using taboo language to achieve conversational power. Having investigating the expletive usage in single versus coed conversations, he found that there was only a slight difference in the total number of taboo words used by women and men when in the company of their own sex. However, analysis of the coed conversations suggested that women used 83 taboo words compared to only 64 used by males. Limbrick (1991) concluded that this increased use of taboo words by females is a strategy employed to ensure they are not in coed conversations marginalized. Moreover, his English taboo use analysis in single versus mixed -gender conversations revealed that males swore slightly more than females in single -gender conversations. Unlike Lakoff's (1975) theory, the results of this study showed that females not only swore considerably more than males in mixed-sex conversations, but also used more offensive taboo words when interacting with males than previously suggested .

Bayard and Krishnapp's (2001) study of taboo English use in single versus coed conversations ended in the same result. They found that females are increasingly breaking rules surrounding the stereotypical male and female English taboo use .The study examined gender variation in university students' English taboo use through quantitative analysis of actual conversational data. The study showed that although females used slightly fewer taboo words than males ,there was little gender difference in the strength of the taboo words used. However, these researchers like Limbrick (1991) found that the males did not use the mildest forms of taboo words. The study concluded that the use of English taboos as symbols of both power and solidarity is no longer the exclusive privilege of males .

Murray (1995) also held that males and females use the same kinds of taboo words with nearly the same frequency. However, he contends that the differences can be lying in when and where the swearing occurs. Generally, males are cautious about using expletives when in the presence of females and both sexes are expected to be less likely to use stronger expletives when members of the opposite sex are around. While males

use dirty words indiscriminately, Murray (1995, p.149) states "females do tend to increase their dirty-word usage when they're with only other females". Murray's findings are reiterated by Wardhaugh (1998). He restates that "women also do not usually employ the profanities and obscenities men use, or, if they do, use them in different circumstances or are judged differently for using them" (p. 307). It is clear that the theories about the use of taboo words by males and females are not straightforward enough.

In a study, Risch (1987) investigated derogatory terms used by 44 middle-class female university students, aged between 18-32. The validity of the assumption that women are socially and linguistically conservative, ladylike and use less and milder taboo words than men were brought into question. Her results suggest females compared to males use a surprisingly high number of offensive terms. Risch (1987) suggested that the use of taboo words be more appropriately applied to the contrast between public versus private discourse than to that of the speech patterns of women versus the language of men.

De Klerk (1992), investigating 160 English-speaking South African adults strongly backs up the results Risch's results that females "do use derogatory language and appear to be doing so in increasing numbers".

Vilalta (2001), based on De Klerk's study, with eight Spanish speaking university candidates analyzing taboo Spanish words also supports De Klerk's findings. This Spanish study revealed that taboo words used by young women are not isolated geographically. These results illustrate that females do have a set of unladylike taboo words in comparison to males and are using them more and more frequently.

A possible rationale for the increased use of taboo language by females appeared in very early research conducted in America. Oliver and Rubin (1979) argued for the increasing use of women's taboo word that a women's knowledge or affiliation with the feminist movement might be a contributing factor towards the use of taboo words. In their study they investigated the taboo use of 28 females aged between 40-55 years. Fourteen of the participants were married and 14 were single. Age was considered to be a key variable in women's use of taboo language. The younger females had a more liberal approach and tendency to using taboo words than their older ones. They deduced that a women's feeling of liberation would influence their patterns of taboo use and concluded that the more liberated women are, the more frequently they use taboos. The younger female's use of taboo language was an overt expression of their liberality as a result of the feminist movement in West.

Another study conducted by Bailey and Timm (1976) placed an emphasis on that age is an important variable in the use of English taboos. This study explored the taboo use of 14 women and 15 men. Women were aged from 19-56 years, and the men were aged from 19-61. The results suggested that the females in the study aged between 34-31 years old be reported to use more taboo words than both their younger (19-23) and older (43-56) female counterparts. In addition, this 31-34 year old females used an average of 12 taboo words, second only to the 28-32 male participants who used an average of 17.7 taboo words. Based on the findings of their study, Oliver and Rubin (1975), Bailey and Timm (1976) attribute this high frequency of English word use by the 31-34 females in the study

to a dramatic reversal of expected feminine behavior which may be owing to affiliation to or support for the feminist movement.

One more recent study also subscribed to the claim that the feminist movement has affected woman's use of English taboo. Karyn Stapleton (2003) Cautions against generalized models of gender-induced speech style and the ideology that females are more linguistically conservative than males, he considers English taboo words to be a resource that arms speakers to establish an identity while engaged in a particular community.

Stapleton (2003) sought to address the use of taboo words within a specific community and to investigate swearing as a means of identity production within a community. The community was a group of 30 (15 male and 15 female) undergraduate drinking friends aged 22-30 years in Ireland. The difference between Stapleton's study and others' is that it focused on participants verbalized accounts of what swearing meant for them in the course of their everyday lives. He learned that the use of taboo words formed an integral means of group participation for this community. Both male and female members considered terms such as *shit*, *bollocks*, *shag*, *prick* and *wanker* to be entirely appropriate linguistic behavior for the social setting (a bar). The group clearly demonstrated a liberal attitude towards words considered to be offensive by past generations. The acceptance of taboo words is a clear example of how linguistic behavior reflects shifts in attitudes. The increased use of these terms could cause them to lose their meaning power as they become more linguistically commonplace (Fine and Johnson, 1984). There were no major gender differences in the reasons participants used taboo words (Stapleton, 2003). The majority of respondents reported that they used taboo words when they were angry, tense or stressed out. It is important here to re-emphasize that the traditional link between swearing and aggression has supported the view that swearing is a male activity. Although an equal number of females and males in this study used taboo words to vent anger, he maintains that the link between strong language and aggression does not work as a means of gender constitution. This, in turn, denotes that taboo use does not constitute masculine speech in any straightforward manner. The most frequently mentioned reason for taboo use for both sexes was to create humor. The students are said to use these taboo words to align themselves with other members of the group to establish in-group membership and demonstrate solidarity.

However, a very different picture turns out concerning words associated with parts of the female body. A gender divide was seen with regard to the perception of offensiveness of the words such as *cunt* and *tits*. Almost all of the female participants unanimously agreed that these words were highly offensive. In contrast, only half of the male candidates considered the vaginal terms to be offensive while none considered the word *tits* to be offensive. The important point to be made here is that feminist influences, such as "resistance to the objectification/trivialization of women, awareness of sexual aggression, and the need for female solidarity" (Stapleton, 2003, p. 27) are evident in the females' responses about the rejection of the use of taboo words related to parts of the female body. Results showed that the issue of sexism was an important one for the

females in this study who generally reported that they avoided these terms for they conveyed derogatory images of women .

Moreover, results showed that males thought that they had greater rights to the use of taboo words than their female counterparts. This thought was under scored when respondents were asked whether they agreed that certain words, particularly those related to parts of the female body, were more acceptable for men than women. In this instance, a gender divide was again clearly noticeable, with 14 men, compared to only three women agreeing with the statement. In addition, 13 men were reported to use the taboo word *cunt* while only one female reported regularly using this word. The men in this study viewed taboo words as a male realm. However, the female participants who rejected any notions of gender discrimination refute this view .

CONCLUSION

Area of taboo words can be regarded as a fertile land on which future investigations can be conducted. The researcher hopes this review supply subsequent researchers with helpful, valuable information.

This study has posed some questions and it would be of value to explore the following through future research:

1. What are Iranians' sources of information about taboo words?
2. Under which circumstances Iranians resort to using English taboo words?
3. Do Iranians' Persian taboo word literacy vary depending on sociocultural factors such as culture, gender, age, socio-economic background?

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