

Taboos: Universalities and Differences

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The word *taboo* was borrowed by Captain Cook in 1769 from the Polynesian language spoken on the Hawaiian Islands. The very fact that Europeans use such an exotic word to denote a phenomenon which is common in our own culture is symptomatic of the universality of the phenomenon of taboo in the language system.

According to psychological motivation taboos fall under three categories. The first of these categories is fear, which has served as a motivation for creating different taboos on pronouncing the names of certain supernatural beings aloud. These include the name of God, the devil, as well as names of animals ranging from ants, bees and worms to bears, tigers and lions, even butterflies and squirrels. People also try to avoid direct reference to topics they find unpleasant. Thus, the second category is delicacy - a wish not to mention unpleasant and shameful events. Here topics such as death, disease, physical and mental defects, criminal actions are included. The third category is a sense of decency and propriety, where words referring to sex, swear-words and names of certain parts and functions of body are included. While all the above mentioned three types of taboo words are of wide currency, none of them is an unrestricted universal, since they are governed by social and cultural factors, and arise only in certain environments.

Taboos are part and parcel of different languages and probably represent the layer of language, which is one of the expressions of culture of the given society. There exist various definitions of taboos and taboo words. Oxford dictionary gives the following definition for the word taboo: "Taboo is a cultural or religious custom that forbids people to do, touch, use or talk about certain thing". Taboo words are the words that are often considered offensive, shocking or rude, e.g. because they refer to sex, the body or race" (Oxford dictionary 2000).

One of the most popular groups of taboos is represented by words denoting swearing and cursing. English has a fairly elaborate system of swearing. When we talk about swearwords, we must also include fixed expressions such as *go to hell*, as well as single words such as *shit*. The reason we can say that *go to hell* is a fixed expression is that it is impossible to replace *go* with another verb of motion, such as *walk*, *run* or *jump* (Andersson, Trudgill 1994:58-59).

Proper names can also become taboos. In many primitive societies it is rather common for a person to have two names. This phenomenon can be observed in Armenian society as well. Very often parents use different names to call their children, or sometimes just call them «*սուրբ*» (brother) or «*քույրիկ*» (sister). People believe that by pronouncing their names aloud they may fall under the influence of others (Crystal 1997). Certain taboos lose their sting over periods of time. In modern western countries most people are more comfortable now than before when they discuss social issues such as alcoholism, depression, divorce, etc. We can say that the first type of taboos is bound to

become rarer with the progress of civilization, though presumably it will not disappear altogether. Medical diseases and disorders such as cancer, AIDS and suicide aren't any longer considered to be heavy taboos. On the other hand, the second and, especially, the third type, will be encouraged with the development of higher moral standards and more refined ways of social behavior. Societal taboos represent the polarizing issues of sex, death, racism, genderism, ethnicity, nationality, religion, politics, money, socio-economic class, sexual orientation and disability. Thus, words may become taboos if they are considered to display bad taste by some people, or should be avoided because they refer to stark or vulgar realities.

The existence of taboos throughout the history of mankind has created the need to find words and expressions that enable people to talk about the subjects concerned without feeling uncomfortable, or being afraid of hurting another person's feelings. Such words and expressions are referred to as "euphemisms". Euphemisms can be portrayed in two different ways, either positively or negatively. Euphemisms can also be presented in unconscious or conscious positions. Positive euphemisms are typically used to inflate and make certain topics more inviting than they really are. An example of this type of euphemism is the word *cemetery*, which is very common in the English language, but the true motivation of the given euphemism is the word *sleeping place*. Negative euphemisms are also used in English to the negative impacts in the society. An example of this type of euphemism is to try and turn one's trade into profession, such as the *hookers* or *whores* who walk the street are commonly referred to as *working girls*, which is more appropriate to use when talking about these people's job. These euphemisms have been used for such a long time in the language that people are probably completely unaware of their indirect nature.

Today the use of taboos is governed by context and medium. They are most strictly observed in the press, the printed word and broadcasting, but less so in oral usage, especially in male-to-male talk. Gender, together with culture differences in using taboo words, has been a major topic of interest in language study. Thus, the use of vulgar language is often less associated with women. As noted by Lakoff, a number of studies show that men are more likely, than women, to use obscene expressions. In most societies that frown at the use of taboo language by women, it is generally held that men use taboo words more than the women. In such societies, women therefore tend to use what are described as "polished" and "more refined" words than men (Lakoff 1980).

The question of context of language use may also include the person with whom the speaker is interacting. The data presented by Anderson and Trudgill show that most students claim they never use taboo words. Although the differences are not statistically significant, the data show that it is the female students, than male, who claim not to use taboo words. When the self-reports were analyzed in terms of the person of interlocution, it was observed that more male young adults than the female ones, had claimed to use the words among their friends, while more female informants, than the male, had claimed to use those same words in the presence of just anybody. It is not apparent why more female students would claim to use the words in any context than their male counterparts. There is, however, no statistically significant association between these self-

reports on context of use of taboo words and the gender of the speaker (Andersson, Trudgill 1994).

It is also stated that taboo words produce physical effects on people who read or hear them. These effects are elevated heart rate, elevated skin conductivity, shallower breathing. It is obvious that the usage of taboos is dependent on the culture of the society where they are used. The use of language in cultural accumulation and historical transmission is obvious and important. This applies not only to sophisticated levels but to primitive ones as well. A great deal of the cultural stock in trade of a primitive society is presented in a more or less well defined linguistic form. Proverbs, medicine formulae, standardized prayers, folk tales, standardized speeches, song texts, and genealogies are some of the more overt forms which language takes as culture-preserving instrument (Sapir 1961).

At present the category that most conforms to genuine taboo, especially in the United States, is that of race. Generally, taboo words are rich in fricatives and stops that create a harsh and emotive sound. People use these words to express pain, anger, frustration, annoyance, to insult someone, to invoke supernatural assistance in harming someone or adding emphasis to statements whether negative or positive in content.

Two experiments concerning the use of taboo words have been performed with English-speaking and Armenian-speaking participants. In the first experiment the informants (10 Armenian-speaking females and 10 Armenian-speaking males; and 10 English-speaking females and 10 English-speaking males) have been asked to write the words which they will not pronounce in public. The list of the words written by the informants included words referring to sex, swear words, parts of body, certain diseases, death. The results have proved that there exist differences in the answers of the informants depending not only on their nationality but also on their gender. All Armenian-speaking female informants regarded the words referring to sex and swear-words as taboos, meanwhile only 5 of Armenian-speaking male informants regarded sex and 7 of them – swear-words as taboos. On the other hand, only 4 English-speaking female and 2 male informants considered sex and swear-words to be taboos.

During the second experiment a photo of a black man was shown to the informants and they were asked to name the person they saw on that photo. None of the English-speaking informants mentioned the word “nigger”, while the majority of the Armenian-speaking informants used the word «նիգր» (13 inf.). This fact comes to prove that the word “nigger” is mostly banned in American public discourse, whereas it is quite acceptable for Armenians to use this word along with the words «սևամորթ», «սևաշուկ», «սև»:

As it has already been mentioned, no taboo is known to be absolute universal, but some of them occur in many cultures known to us. In contemporary Western societies taboos are closely entwined with the concepts of politeness and face, that is a person's self-image.

The growth and decay of different forms of taboos should be studied systematically in various languages to reveal the social and cultural developments in the societies in which this or that language operates.

References:

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Թաբուներ, ընդհանրություններ ու տարբերություններ

Գոյություն ունենալով գրեթե բոլոր լեզուներում՝ թաբուները ներկայացնում են այն լեզվական շերտը, որն արտահայտում է այս կամ այն հասարակության մշակույթը: Այսօր թաբուների գործածումը պայմանավորված է այն համատեքստով, որում վերջիններս օգտագործվում են:

Մույն հոդվածի շրջանակներում փորձ է արվում քննել թաբուների օգտագործումը հայերենի և անգլերենի լեզվակիրների մոտ: Կատարված գիտափորձի արդյունքները ևս մեկ անգամ ապացուցեցին, որ թաբուների օգտագործումը կախված է այն մշակույթից, որում ապրում է անհատը:

Թաբուների առաջացումն ու անհետացումը հարկ է ուսումնասիրել տարբեր լեզուներում՝ վեր հանելու հասարակական և մշակութային զարգացումները այն հասարակություններում, որոնցում օգտագործվում է այս կամ այն լեզուն: