

## Investigating Taboo Words in English Language

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### **Abstract:**

Taboo words are “unthinkable” actions. Even the thought of violating taboos triggers a punishment. It is considered a simple model in which taboos are part of the definition of one’s identity. Pondering over breaking the taboos changes the individual’s choice set and provides information on possible private benefits but is costly because it contradicts one’s identity. In every society, there are believed to be inappropriate words if spoken on public occasions. Many words are therefore taken as silly, vulgar, or obscene when used in communication. These words are “taboos”. So, the aim of this paper is to identify and define the concept of taboo words, to investigate all the major varieties of English taboos, i.e., bodily excretions, death and disease, sex, four-letter words, privacy, and discriminatory language, and to show and explain the concepts of discriminatory words. Euphemistic and roundabout ways of avoiding using taboo words are offered to deal with such situations. Some of the results show that: some words are hardly ever used because they are too emotional or offensive, a linguistic universal is that no social group uses language quite at random, and English and Americans believe that avoiding linguistic taboo is the symbol of their civilization.

**Keywords:** taboos, euphemisms.

## استقصاء الكلمات المحرمة في اللغة الإنجليزية

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## المستخلص:

الكلمات المحرمة هي اعمال «لا يمكن تصورها». وحتى التفكير في انتهاكها يؤدي إلى العقوبة. وتعتبر نموذجًا بسيطًا تكون فيه الكلمات المحرمة جزءًا من تعريف هوية المرء. إن التفكير في كسر الكلمات المحرمة يغير مجموعة خيارات الفرد ويوفر معلومات عن الفوائد الخاصة المحتملة ولكنه مكلف لأنه يتعارض مع هوية الفرد. في كل مجتمع، يُعتقد أن هناك كلمات غير لائقة إذا تم التحدث بها في المناسبات العامة. لذلك يتم اعتبار العديد من الكلمات سخيفة أو مبتذلة أو فاحشة عند استخدامها في التواصل. هذه الكلمات من «المحرمات». لذا، فإن الهدف من هذه الورقة هو تحديد وتعريف مفهوم الكلمات المحرمة، والتحقق في جميع الأنواع الرئيسة للكلمات المحرمة في الإنجليزية، مثل الإفرازات الجسدية، والموت والمرض، والجنس، والكلمات المكونة من أربعة أحرف، والخصوصية، واللغة التمييزية، وإظهار وشرح مفاهيم الكلمات التمييزية. يتم تقديم طرق ملطفة لتجنب استخدام الكلمات المحظورة للتعامل مع هكذا مواقف. تظهر بعض النتائج أن: بعض الكلمات نادرًا ما يتم استخدامها لأنها عاطفية جدًا أو مسيئة، لغويًا علمياً لا توجد مجموعة اجتماعية تستخدم اللغة بشكل عشوائي تمامًا، ويعتقد الإنجليز والأمريكيون أن تجنب المحرمات اللغوية هو رمز حضارتهم. كلمات مفتاحية: الكلمات المحرمة، التعابير الملطفة.

## Introduction

In this modern era, when everything in the world is subjected to change with the spread of technology, followed by advancement in the fields of education, agriculture, medicine, and many more, changing the mindset of people living in the 21st century over the globe. Culture is changing leading to the change in people and their dealings enough to stimulate language change. (5) claims that language's response to social change is interlinked to development, for language is a social product and every society composes itself through language. Taboo subjects include body functions about sex and excretion, private parts of the body, illness, and death; words believed to be blasphemy; income, salary, age of ladies, and so on.(27) explains that the most interesting way in which society impacts its language is through "taboo" cases.

It is vital to state that the English language is full of taboo words, like many other societies around the world. Taboo subjects

include bodily functions about sex and excretion, the private parts, illnesses and death, words believed to be blasphemy, income, salary, age of ladies, and so on,(7). These taboos are usually applicable in spoken interactions between relations, strangers, and the public. According to(7), most people who speak English know the rules of taboos and observe the rules. Breaking the rules may rouse considerable dissatisfaction. Societies in different countries share this point of view, especially in English-speaking countries. Therefore, studies on English taboos have been an important topic for discussion. However, systematic, and comprehensive studies on this especially in the fields of intercultural communication and sociolinguistics have not been easily seen yet. This paper is to explore various forms of English taboo, and euphemisms are introduced to relieve the harshness of taboo words. Attempts to study a subject that is regarded as a “silent” or taboo in any society is not an easy task. A taboo for(7) is any subject that is prohibited or evokes avoidance by society as it is perceived as harmful to its members. The harm is viewed relatively as arising from its potential to cause anxiety, embarrassment, or shame to individuals. (7) went on to argue that most societies construct taboos around subjects such as body functions, sex, erections, and income among a host of other subjects regarded as sensitive, and that euphemisms can be used to negotiate the presentation of these taboos. In explaining why sex is such a big taboo in most societies, (10) argued that sex reminds us of our animal nature and raises debates about the challenges of morality. According to (11), taboo words in a language are archaic which include profanity i.e., irreverent speech, and blasphemy i.e., attacks on religion, that are prescribed by religious authorities since biblical times while. (7) discussed various taboos including body excretions, death, and disease, sex, four-letter words, privacy, discriminatory language, for example, sexist language and racist language. (23) classifies taboo words with respect to purpose, into four categories including expletives, humorous, abusive, and auxiliary taboos.

## Statement of the Problem

The problem of the study is to investigate taboo words in the English language discourse.

## Objectives of the Study

The aims of this study are:

To identify and define the concept of taboo words.

To identify and evaluate the varieties of English taboo words.

, and to show and explain the concepts of discriminatory words and euphemisms.

## Questions of the Study

The questions of the study are:

1. What are taboo words?
2. What are the varieties of English taboo words?
3. What are the concepts of discriminatory words?
4. What are euphemisms?

## Significance of the Study

Taboo words in the English language have been a controversial topic among sociolinguists since its inception and taboo words are often part of people's everyday speech. Therefore, the study will help to avoid using taboo words and better understand euphemisms.

## Delimits

This study is limited to the investigation of taboo words in the English language discourse.

## Methods

An introduction and a brief review of literature on the studies of taboo words in English were conducted and an analytical and descriptive approach is adopted. Results are summarized and recommendations are made.

### 1. Literature Review

#### a. Origin of Taboo words

Language is considered to contain special powers to be able to cure sickness, keep away evils, and bring good to oneself and harm to an enemy. This belief that words control objects,

people, and spirits influences human activities throughout human history since ancient times. "The word *taboo* was first introduced into European languages by Captain Cook in his description of his third voyage around the world when he visited Polynesia. Here, he witnessed the ways in which the word *taboo* was used for certain avoidance customs ranging across widely different things.(26)Such language usually must be used with great care, and meticulous attention is paid to pronunciation and wording. People even tend to avoid mentioning them. When people must talk about those things, they are talked about in very roundabout ways. Then we have instances of linguistic taboo and euphemism. The word *taboo* is borrowed from Tongan, a language spoken by Polynesians in the Pacific archipelago, where any sacred or humble things are forbidden to touch or even to talk about. (9) "Taboo" does refer to this phenomenon and means "holy" or "untouchable". For a long time, English and American believe that avoiding linguistic taboo is the symbol of their civilization. They refuse to talk about certain objects or actions and refuse to use the language referring to them. (9)

### **b. Definition of the word taboo**

According to(29), a taboo is a prohibition or avoidance in any society of behavior believed to be harmful to its members in that it would cause them anxiety, embarrassment, or shame. Consequently, so far as language is concerned, certain things are not to be said for certain objects can be referred to only in certain circumstances, for example, only by certain people, or through deliberate circumlocution, i.e., euphemistically. Tabooed subjects can vary widely: sex, death, illness, excretion, bodily functions, religious matters, and the supernatural. But quite often they extend to other aspects of social life. (25)says taboo (also tabu) is a social or religious custom prohibiting or restricting a particular practice or forbidding association with a particular person, place, or thing. (12) explains it like this, a taboo is a cultural or religious custom that does not allow people to do, use or talk about a particular thing as people find it offensive or embarrassing; taboo words are words that many

people consider offensive or shocking, for example, because they refer to sex, the body or people's race. In(21), a taboo word is a term that is avoided for religious, political, or sexual reasons and is usually replaced by a euphemism, e.g., restroom or bathroom for the toilet. In these dictionaries, the definitions of "taboo" seemingly vary but basically, they are the same.

## **2.Varieties of English Taboo Words**

### **2.1Bodily Excretions**

(7)writes that:in any language, there are certain things that must be avoided mentioning. It applies to the words with such connotations as well. In English, the first of these that occur to people are words dealing with excretions. In fact, except for tears, all the words concerning bodily excretions are believed taboo. The earliest sayings of "move the bowels" and "pass water" are considered inelegant. And "defecate" and "urinate" seem to be the words used in hospitals.Thus, some euphemisms find themselves replacing them, such as answering the call of nature and doing one's needs. We ask where the "restroom" is, although we have no intention of having a rest. "Powder room" "loo", and "john" are other ways to say "toilet". Indeed, it is impossible to explain what a "restroom" is for without the use of roundabout ways or baby talk. It's "where you wash your hands" or "where you pee or poo", which are already euphemisms. Here we see a semantic change involved as the expressions used often have little to do with the referents.

### **2.2Death and Disease**

The fear of death carries into fear of words having to do with death and certain diseases. Many people believe words have great relations with what they symbolize, therefore "If anything should happen to me" means "when I die". Instead of saying "die", they use substitute expressions such as "pass away", "go to his reward", "answer the call of God", "go home", "to have a better place", and "depart" and "go west". Similar words are so many. Some serious diseases are also taboo topics. Cancer is said in a roundabout way as "Big C" or "terminally ill". So, is it with the disease of mental

disorder and intelligence deficiency? Their euphemistic sayings may be “He is not all there.” Or “She is a little eccentric / a little confused.”

### 2.3 Sex

According to (4), words having to do with anatomy and sex, and words even vaguely suggesting anatomical or sexual matters, have remarkable connotations, especially in American culture. Ladies of the nineteenth century could not bring themselves to say “breast” or “leg”, not even of chicken so the terms “white meat” and “dark meat” were substituted. It was thought inelegant to speak of “going to bed”, and “to retire” was used instead. In the United States, the sexual revolution of the 1960s began to make a great change. English-speaking countries tend to be freer and more tolerant of this in recent years. People, particularly younger ones, feel freer than they once did to take about sex-related subjects, masturbation, impotence, sexual activities of various kinds, and human sex organs are more likely to be talked about or written about than they were 15 or 20 years ago. Thus, to make love, to have sex with, etc., which are slightly “dressed-up” terms, are not all uncommon in writing now. <sup>(4)</sup>

### 2.4 Four-letter Words

People are more tolerant of such words as fuck, tits, damn, the so-called “four-letter words”. For instance, on the streets in London, we could see the eye-catching shop name “FCUK”, which in fact is the abbreviation of “French Connection United Kingdom”. Despite the sexual revolution, these words are still considered improper in most conversations, even in written form. In 1963, Eric Partridge included fuck in his Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English. Despite his use of an asterisk for the vowel “u”, the result was a storm of complaints to schools, libraries, and the police. Even today, the book is not always available on the open shelves of public libraries. Later, the word quickly appeared in the daily press, and it has become widespread in literary works. Despite the development of liberal attitudes, there is still a strong

antagonism to the use of four-letter words in public speaking; and they are still not always to be found in dictionaries. (7) concurred that these words are still considered unacceptable in conversation and writing.

### 3. Swear Words

(14) give just the opposite picture when they claim that swearing is not always impolite since they are used considering the socio-cultural orientation of one's relationship with the interlocutor. They also go far as claiming that some swear words are neither impolite nor polite but rather neutral or politic in their impacts. Moreover, it is argued a general formula for impoliteness or inappropriateness cannot be constructed because it depends on the relationship of the interlocutors and the speech practices they negotiate. Swearing indicates informality and euphemism demonstrates formal politeness. These speakers maintain their allegiance, and covert prestige, with a certain group through taboo language despite the benefits they may have by sticking to the accepted code (1). Thus, the taboo language consists of a little paradox. A person swears to show intimacy in one place and uses it to show the distance. At the same time, there are many daily examples of taboo language that express such emotions as hatred, frustration, and surprise. The most common speech comprises single words or short phrases, conveying different levels of intensity and attracting different degrees of social approval. English examples range from the mild such as heck and dash, to the harshest one, fuck. In these social contexts, swearing can become a dominant linguistic feature, with sentences often containing taboo words. Sex, excretion, and supernatural power are the main sources of swear words. Half of them relate to words referring to body parts and functions that societies considered taboo, such as merd, ball, and other four-letter words. Another half deals with the names of gods, devils, etc. like God, Dear Lord, By the holy sacrament, Heavens, and Hell. (1), "swearing is a type of language use in which the expression: a. refers to something that is taboo and/or stigmatized in the culture should not

be interpreted literally c.it can be used to express strong emotions and attitudes.(7) considered cursing and swearing as linguistic forms. He explained that a set of swearwords and phrases can be found in legal, religious, and other formal contexts, i.e., ‘heck’ and ‘dash’ (mild forms) and ‘fuck’ and ‘shit’ (strong forms). According to (24),”children usually avoid swearing in front of adults, so as not to shock or annoy them, and adults avoid swearing in front of children for similar reasons.”

#### **4.Privacy**

One of the reasons behind the taboo on questions about personal matters is that English-speaking people put a high value on privacy. The English have a saying “A man’s home is his castle”, meaning a man’s home is sacred to him; no one should come in without permission. So, is it also with his life, personal affairs, and private concerns? To ask questions concerning one’s age, weight, income, marital status, politics, religion, etc. would be considered prying into an individual’s personal life, which is another form of invading a person’s “castle”. (4)“It’s none of your business” may also reflect their value on privacy. Basically, you should not ask the following questions to an English or an American. How old are you? What’s your income? What’s your religion? Are you married? Where are you going? How much did you pay for that? Close contact and a certain amount of mutual dependence and mutual concern mean that one person’s affairs are also very much the affairs of one family, one’s neighbors, and even the larger community to which one belongs.

#### **5.Discriminatory words**

In recent times, many people have a growing tendency to be sensitive to what is called sexist words and racist words:

##### **5.1Sexist words**

In its present-day means language that is prejudiced against the female. Studies of sexism in the English language began with American women concerned with the effects of language on people’s attitudes towards women, which prejudice against women

and in favor of men. In speech and writing, for example, a person or a baby of unknown sex is referred to as he rather than she; the person (even a woman) presiding over a meeting is the chairman. The history of our world is the history of mankind, not woman-kind. (4) Those words that are “unmarked” usually refer to the males. If referring to females, additional marks will be put before or after it, for example, waiter—waitress, hero—heroine, doctor—woman doctor. There is a distinction between Mrs. and Miss in English, which is not paralleled by a pair of titles showing whether a man is married. This implies unfairly that it is more important for a woman than for a man to show whether they are married, despite the introduction of Ms. In English, there is a tendency which involves words that are clearly restricted to one sex or the other, with female words tending to have less favorable meanings. A class pair is a master and mistress, where the male meaning is “good”, and the female meaning is “bad”; specifically, a mistress is a partner for extramarital sex, (13). It reflects greater tolerance towards men in sexual liberties. Scholars, linguists, and researchers reason that sexist language preserves the existing patriarchy. They argue that the adoption of non-sexist language advances equality of the sexes. Further, sexist language deconstructs unequal power relationships, as posited by, (22) as it gives superiority to one sex over the other. Linguists who ventured on sexist and non-sexist language usage revealed that although sexist language could also be used to diminish, trivialize, or exclude men, it is women who predominantly bear the brunt of its effects. While there have been several research validating the fact that sexist language is said to be decreasing in English academic writing, sexist language is still widely used in the popular press and other media, and empirical observations reveal that even in classroom settings, the use of sexist language is still prevalent. To note, empirical data shows that junior pre-service English teachers in their written discourses predominantly use masculine generics to describe people in general. It is widely agreed that “men curse more often than women; men

use a larger vocabulary of curse words than do women, and men use more offensive curse words than do women” (14). In (16) theory, one feature of women’s language is that “super polite forms, e.g., indirect requests, euphemisms; and avoidance of strong swear words” (16). However, (3) mentions (8) in her book, which shows that “both men and women swear more in the company of their own sex;” and “male usage of swear words in particular drops dramatically in mixed-sex conversations” (3)

#### **4.2 Racist words**

Racism is the belief that some human races are inherently inferior to others. Racist language is that which shows a bias against certain racial or ethnic groups; it is the language that degrades or belittles them. (4). In the English language, much of the discrimination is against “black”, whether black people or black color. The color white generally stands for innocence, purity, cleanliness, and chastity—all words with positive, pleasant connotations. On the other hand, the color black is associated with wickedness, evil, and filth, e.g., blackguard, blacklist, and black mark. A member of a family that others are ashamed of is called a black sheep, not a white sheep. Even a lie, if it is a white lie, is not so bad as an ordinary lie, or a black lie. However, it is not just blacks who are called degrading names in the U.S. There are names for other racial or ethnic groups as well: Italians are called dagos; Jews—kikes; Poles—Polacks; Chinese—chinks; Japanese—japs; and so on. All of these are insulting names, reflecting strong racial prejudice. (4) Sometimes, one will hear racial remarks or “ethnic jokes”—jokes about the supposed stupidity or ignorance of certain groups. Such jokes may appear funny, but they are offensive, nevertheless.

#### **6. The use of euphemisms**

The main subject of sex, being a major concern in human life and one that is likely to elicit embarrassment, is the main source of euphemism for all people of most ages and walks of life. Euphemisms are powerful linguistic tools embedded so deeply in our language that few of us even those who pride themselves on

being plainspoken, ever get through a day without using them,” (19). They are used mainly insensitive texts to preserve courtesy. People tend to use euphemism to mitigate discourteous discourses, to hide unmannered ideas, to camouflage unpleasant thoughts, or to use any figure of speech such as metonymy, pun, and metaphor for replacing taboo words. Euphemism, in almost all sensitive issues, is widely used especially in the cases of sexual taboos. (17) indicates that euphemism is social and emotional and allows ‘discussions of “touchy” or taboo subjects (such as sex, personal appearances, or religion) without enraging, outraging, or upsetting other people, and acts as a pressure valve whilst maintaining the appearance of civility’. (7) argues that euphemism was made by individuals to stifle forbidden words, that is, words that are considered ‘too unpleasant’. He further expresses that euphemism is a language that sounds pleasant in upsetting circumstances. To erase the harshness of taboo words, people have created euphemisms, words supplanted language considered too unpleasant. (2), once observed that “a language without euphemisms would be a defective instrument of communication.” So is taboo without euphemisms. It appears that among all the people of the world there is a feeling that the names of the gods are too holy, and the names of evil spirits too terrifying, and they are not supposed to be treated as other common words. Therefore, they are purposefully avoided in a roundabout way. Gee, gosh almighty and gosh darn are ways to say, Jesus, God Almighty and God damn. They are the use of euphemisms. Euphemistic words and expressions allow us to talk about unpleasant things and neutralize the unpleasantness. They find dozens of expressions, especially in the words of different jobs. Euphemisms make unpleasant jobs more attractive, even the word job itself is called profession. For example, a janitor becomes a custodian; a sanitation engineer replaces a garbage collector; a gardener is changed into a landscape architect. Euphemistic terms are found used in every aspect of society, and one of them is the group of words describing “poor” or “poor condition”. In

English, except for poor, poverty-stricken, broke, there are in an awkward financial situation, badly off, and so on. During the last twenty years or so, several other words have been trying to take their place, at least among educated circles. (28) had a humorous sentence "I used to think I was poor. Then they told me I wasn't poor, I was needy, I was deprived. Then they told me unprivileged was overused. I was disadvantaged. I still don't have a dime. But I have a great vocabulary." Very often euphemisms can be used to avoid an embarrassing situation and thus protect an individual's feelings. It becomes obvious in international relations. In 1983, after the U.S. sent its armed forces into Grenada, Regan showed his irritation with reporters at their "frequent use of the word invasion." "This", he said, "was a rescue mission". Grenada is a Third World country. Most such countries are poor. The terms for these countries are first underdeveloped nations; later developing nations and emerging nations took their place. The United Nations calls them less-developed countries.(4) However, the excessive use of euphemisms is not appropriate either. Suppose an occasion where there is such a line "The departed rests in his casket in a slumber room where friends may visit with him before the grief therapist assists the dear one to his plot in a memorial garden". (9). Too many euphemisms in one sentence made it the opposite just to what is wished.

## 7. Results

1. Taboo and euphemism affect us all.
2. We all probably have a few things we refuse to talk about directly.
3. Some words are hardly ever used because they are too emotional or offensive.
4. Each social group is different from every other in how it behaves in this way or that way.
5. The use of language is the basis of friendly mutual communication.
6. A linguistic universal is that no social group uses language quite at random.

7. English and American believe that avoiding linguistic taboo is the symbol of their civilization.

### **8. Recommendations**

It is recommended that more attention should be paid to the functions of taboo words which do not always mean to hurt others' feelings. There is still much for researchers to investigate and disclose detailed work on taboo words and the roundabout ways of avoiding using them. The door is still left open to further research on taboo. Future research can, for instance, focus on the reasons behind using different strategies for different taboo words or on exploring new areas of taboo in other cultures. Also, research can lead to the clarification of the role of metaphorical language in using euphemisms. Further, since taboos are not limited to verbal communication and include the non-verbal realm of communication, it is recommended that future research focus on this aspect too.

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