

Circumnavigating taboos

A functional and formal typology

Melanie Keller,¹ Philipp Striedl,¹ Daniel Biro,¹

Johanna Holzer¹ and Kate Burridge²

¹Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich | ²Monash University

This article elaborates on Wolfgang Schulze's keynote speech of the same title at the 26th LIPP Symposium in Munich in 2019. It is based on the slides from his talk and various teaching materials, of which some figures have been translated from German to English before their inclusion in this article. While this article's foundation rests on Schulze's theories and research, we have done our best to build upon his work; direct quotes and key concepts of his will be cited throughout the text. Schulze intended to write this article himself, but after his unexpected passing in early 2020, we decided to offer this contribution on his behalf.

Research on taboo is widely spread across diverse academic disciplines that each attribute slightly, yet noticeably, different meanings to the concept. This article proposes an all-encompassing definition applicable to all socio-cultural contexts. To arrive at this comprehensive understanding, we first briefly survey the history of *taboo* and its linguistic study. Then, we present a formal and functional typology of circumnavigating taboos, taking into account the concepts of *mana* and *noa* as proposed by Schulze (2019: 13, 15, 16). While the specific social restrictions resulting from tabooed relations vary from community to community, the purpose of taboo remains the same: social stability, protection and sustainability. Linguistic taboos contribute to these social functions by restricting the use of certain linguistic signs in certain situations. Such constraints necessitate strategies for avoiding taboo, including articulation shift, lexical substitution and the emergence of special languages, detailed here.

Keywords: typology, taboo, sociology, cognitive linguistics, anthropology, language

1. Introduction

Researchers have been fascinated by the concept of taboo since Captain James Cook's voyages to the Polynesian islands in the eighteenth century. Since then, it has been investigated from many different academic perspectives, mainly coming from cultural studies, psychology, sociology and anthropology. Influential contributions in these fields include the classics such as James Frazer's *The Golden Bough Part II: Taboo and the perils of the soul* (1890), Émile Durkheim's *Incest: The nature and origin of the taboo* (1897), Sigmund Freud's *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances Between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics* (1913), and more recently Franz Steiner's *Taboo* (1956) and Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966).

Systematic research on linguistic taboos, however, only started to take shape about 30 years ago with the work of Keith Allan and Kate Burridge in Australia, Timothy Jay in the United States and Hartmut Schröder in Germany. This research delay was likely due to two main factors: "(1) the extralinguistic difficulty motivated by social stigmatization of the phenomenon and (2) the linguistic difficulty based on its inherent complexity" (Pizarro Pedraza 2018:2). Allan and Burridge established this subfield with their work on forbidden words and euphemisms, Jay produced the first serious psycholinguistic investigation of cursing, and Schröder focused on cultural semiotics and the rhetorical aspects of taboo. All four were instrumental in legitimizing taboo as an appropriate, worthwhile object of linguistic study and effectively paved the way for the rise in taboo research in the past ten years. Now the field draws from a rich diversity of sub-disciplines to investigate taboo-related phenomena, including, but not limited to, cognitive linguistics, computer-mediated communication, psycholinguistics, neurology, anthropology, corpus linguistics, gender studies and historical linguistics.

Despite all the work on taboo that has been carried out across these various fields, to date no general consensus on its definition exists. *Taboo* remains a large umbrella term for a wide range of restrictions which are culturally and historically dependent – it is a term whose fine-grained meaning differs according to the academic discipline. In this article, we want to contribute to the search for a wider understanding of taboo and propose a preliminary typology of its circumvention with respect to both its possible functions and its linguistic forms. Our examination will begin with the origins of taboo and its indigenous context; then we will shift our focus to an academic context in which we will specifically look at taboos in language. The respective definitions of taboo adhered to will be presented accordingly.

2. The concept of taboo

The term *taboo* is a loanword from the Tongan *tapu* borrowed into English in the eighteenth century. The first attestation is from Captain James Cook's diary in 1777 during his third (and last) voyage to Polynesia in which he describes the Tongan prohibition of mixed gender meals that he witnessed during his stay (Cook 1821a, Vol. V: 347–348). After Cook's death in Hawaii in 1779, his successor James King resumed documenting their voyages in Cook's journal and described a cultural taboo in which Hawaiian women who had recently assisted in a funeral or dressed bodies of the deceased were prohibited from eating with their own hands, and so were fed by others (Cook 1821b, Vol. VII: 151).¹ Similar cultural restrictions were documented by Cook (and further expanded upon by subsequent Western observers) in other indigenous Polynesian communities, such as among the Māori in New Zealand, in Samoa, Tahiti and the Marquesas Islands.

The OED offers several meanings of *taboo*, the first of which refers to a general Polynesian use:²

As originally used in Polynesia, Melanesia, New Zealand, etc.: Set apart for or consecrated to a special use or purpose; restricted to the use of a god, a king, priests, or chiefs, while forbidden to general use; prohibited to a particular class (esp. to women), or to a particular person or persons; inviolable, sacred; forbidden, unlawful; also said of persons under a perpetual or temporary prohibition from certain actions, from food, or from contact with others.

(OED s.v. *taboo*, adj.)

Although this definition is quite inclusive, in order to understand taboo in its original context, the concepts of *noa* and *mana* must also be made clear. In Polynesia, and most of Oceania, *mana* is the supernatural power of life inherent in natural phenomena, animals, objects and some humans; possessing *mana* is considered a great advantage (Schulze 2019:12). Humans who possess *mana* in traditional Polynesian societies are chiefs, shamans and kings. *Mana* also strengthens or increases over time, so the longer a chief is in power, for example,

1. For more information on Tongan honorifics, their socio-political system, and the meaning of *tapu*, please see Sonja Völkel's article in this Special Issue.

2. There's no wholly unifying definition of *taboo* across Polynesia because its meaning is dependent on cultural customs and socio-political structure. Though the islands have similar systems, the slight variations and unique elements each contain alter the realization of taboo in their communities (see Steiner 1956 for more). There are, however, common threads that together create a collective Polynesian concept of taboo and allow for its generic characterization (see Mead 1934 for more).

the more *mana* he accumulates; the same holds true across generations for rulers from one family (Steiner 1956:38). Taboo dictates one's behavior based on whether an entity possesses *mana* or not; it therefore describes the socially regulated restrictions regarding access to objects or people with *mana* (Schulze 2019:13, 15). *Noa* refers to 'ordinary' entities, or those that are free from the restrictions of taboo (Schulze 2019:13). *Noa* and taboo are, thus, not opposites, but mutually exclusive concepts as *noa* is predicate on the absence of taboo (Steiner 1956:36). Figure 1 elaborates on the exact connection between all three Polynesian concepts *taboo*, *noa* and *mana*.

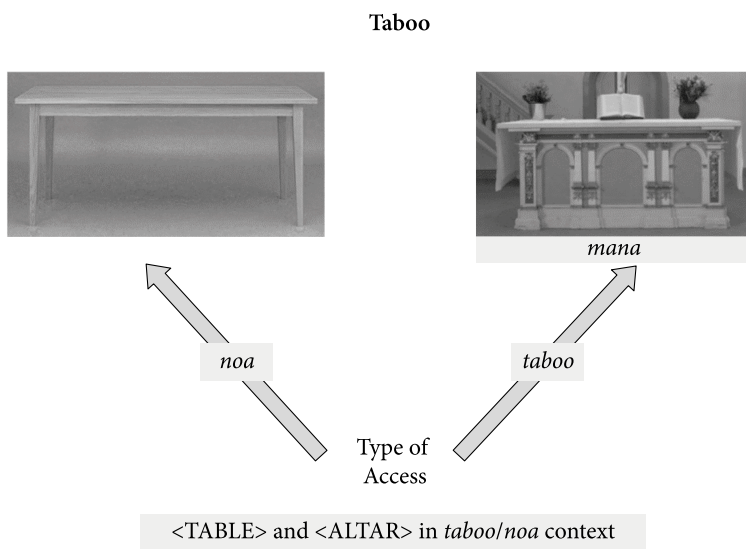


Figure 1. Illustration of *taboo* and *noa* as mutually exclusive forms of access according to an entity's *mana* (Schulze 2019: 17, our translation)

Two objects are shown in Figure 1: a table and an altar. Both are physically similar flat surfaces that provide a level area upon which items can be placed. The table on the left is a typical dining table or desk used for everyday purposes, not requiring special treatment. The altar, on the other hand, is used only in religious ceremonies and thus possesses *mana*. The altar requires tabooed access, or it can only be accessed in an explicit manner in order to perform religious ceremonies. The table enjoys unrestricted or *noa* access as it does not possess *mana*. Taboo can thus be understood as a relational property between *noa* and *mana* (Schulze 2019: 16).

Taboo was subsequently borrowed from the Tongan *tapu* without the concepts of *noa* and *mana* attached. Though it has been argued that similar notions

do exist (*mana* can be understood as, for example ‘spiritual power’; Schulze 2019: 14, or even ‘charisma’; Schröder 2008: 55), the terms themselves did not carry over into English. Thus, the loanword *taboo* was different from *tapu* out of necessity; as its relationship to *mana* and *noa* no longer applied, it narrowed to mean roughly ‘prohibition’ in English. The second and third meanings in the OED are quite detailed:

2. The putting of a person or thing under prohibition or interdict, perpetual or temporary; the fact or condition of being so placed; the prohibition or interdict itself. [...] 3. Prohibition or interdiction generally of the use or practice of anything, or of social intercourse; ostracism. (OED s.v. *taboo*, n)

Even putting aside the complexities of the traditional Polynesian cultural concepts *mana* and *noa* and their implicit formal hierarchy, harnessing an overarching meaning for *taboo* is still difficult due to its heavy dependence on culture, community and context. A more all-encompassing and manageable definition to use is one that “refers to a proscription of behaviour for a specifiable community of one or more persons, at a specifiable time, in specifiable contexts” (Allan & Burridge 2006: 11). Taboos and their associated avoidance rituals are not universal, as seen with Captain James Cook and his visit to Tonga. Even within one community, what is considered taboo and the consequences for taboo breaking change over time; none of these concepts are static.

In our pursuit of an expanded, yet precise understanding of taboo and related phenomena around the world, we assert that it is both useful and necessary to draw from analogous notions of *mana* in modern societies, i.e. charisma, to characterize a functional and formal typology. Therefore, the following description of taboo in its forms and functions will be anchored to the characteristic or quality that is *mana*. As mentioned earlier, linguistic taboo as it “applies to instances of language behavior” (Allan 2019: 1) is of specific interest in this article.

Section 3 consists of three parts. It will first discuss the social function of taboo in more detail, and then go on to present its linguistic forms. It will lastly review some of the linguistic strategies commonly used to avoid taboos in languages around the world. To conclude, Section 4 will discuss linguistic taboo as part of the general social function of language and the long-term or diachronic effects of taboo on language.

3. Form and function of taboos

Taboos affect different social domains that are interrelated: the domains of action, communication and language. This means that taboos not only emerge in inter-

personal communication, but also in individual action and specific linguistic expressions. To be precise, taboos mark the limits of action, communication and language, and they do so without any explicit description or explanation of what should be avoided (Schröder 2008: 55). The strength of this demarcation depends on the respective social norms and values in a particular community and their associated functions. The awareness of these limits is acquired through socialization and thus becomes a decisive factor in the formation of personal identity.

In the following section, the term taboo will be considered from a social constructivist perspective and the question of what purpose taboos serve in social interactions will be addressed.

3.1 The social function of taboos

The frequently referenced tabooed fields of sex, religion, politics and death are quite universal, but conventionally misunderstood. The taboos in these fields are not so much on the concepts themselves, such as SEX or DEATH, but rather on what they evoke. Schröder (1999: 2, our translation) offers a useful specification of four general motivations behind taboos, which we have summarized below:

1. *Taboo of fear* motivated by mystical powers in the world, and directly connecting to taboo (i.e. the concept of *mana*).
2. *Taboo of delicacy* motivated by thoughtfulness and consideration, and applying to the fields of death and illness.
3. *Taboo of propriety* often motivated by feelings of shame, embarrassment and morality, and relating to bodily functions and sexuality.
4. *Taboo of social awareness* in societies that place a high value on tolerance and civility, and resulting in ‘political correctness,’ for example.

These motivations clearly relate to the corresponding social function of taboo. Allan and Burridge (2006: 1) describe the social impetus for taboos in the following way:

Taboos arise out of social constraints on the individual’s behaviour where it can cause discomfort, harm or injury [...]; a social act may breach constraints on polite behaviour. Infractions of taboos can lead to illness or death, as well as to the lesser penalties of corporal punishment, incarceration, social ostracism or mere disapproval. Even an unintended contravention of taboo risks condemnation and censure; generally, people can and do avoid tabooed behaviour unless they intend to violate a taboo.

Social constraints are based on a common belief and community consensus constituting a particular behavior as an offense that results in at times very serious

consequences; the power of taboo is “palpable and guides behavior” (Scholz Williams 2009: 75, our translation). Social behavior is heavily dependent on conventionalized norms and thereby on conventionalized fields deemed taboo. This means that breaking a taboo corresponds with the fear of public censure and sanction, and thus, in accordance with social restrictions, euphemism (avoidance language) is employed by individuals or by social groups to circumnavigate the taboo and ultimately, protect themselves. The existence and meaning of taboos are subject to the political, cultural and social transformations in society in relation to how well or often they are observed and breached. It goes beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the relationship or differences between values, norms and taboos in detail; however, it must be emphasized that taboos, unlike values and norms, are the unexpressed, unexamined or even veiled parts of social norms:

Taboos are avoidance requirements or negative conventions that are very emotionally-loaded because they are deep-rooted and concern the unquestionable norms and values of a society [...] Taboos express an unspoken consensus of which those affected are not even required to be consciously aware.

(Schröder 2008: 55; our translation)

Over the course of history, taboo breaking has been believed to trigger consequences administered by miraculous, religious or mystical forces, resulting in individual punishments (i.e. diseases) or collective punishments (i.e. epidemics). Aside from mystical entities, social groups also act as sanctioning bodies enforcing the adherence to taboos, for example through legislative measures (see Reutner 2009: 8). In short, constraints on behaviour are imposed by someone or some force that individuals believe has authority or power over them, and this can be the law, the gods, the society in which one lives – even self-imposed proscription (e.g. *red wine is taboo for me, it gives me a hangover*).

Taboo is also intensely connected with shame, which is at the basis of the strong connection between taboos and the fields of SEX, DEATH and RELIGION. Schulze specifically commented on the use of taboo language with regard to shame. He defined *Schamgesellschaften* or ‘societies of shame’ as those societies in which the transgression of shame boundaries is penalized and argued that shame is a method for taboo-motivated concealment in societies worldwide (Schulze 2019: 44–46). Holzknicht (1988: 45), for example, writing on naming taboos in Papua New Guinea, describes how violating these taboos

[...] can lead to death by murder, or suicide due to shame. An old man in Waritsian village in the Amari dialect area of Adzera told me that his father had broken a very strong name taboo in front of his father-in-law. The shame caused him to run off into the mountains where enemy groups lived; he deliberately put himself in their way and was killed.

3.1.1 Adherence to taboos

While some anxieties appear to be shared by most, if not all human societies (e.g. people-eating; Korn, Hawes & Radice 2001), notions about what is forbidden do vary from society to society. In the gastronomic preferences and taboos of the world, for example, there is remarkable diversity (notwithstanding the taboo that people should not be turned into food). Taboo is also dynamic, and notions about what is forbidden will change, sometimes dramatically, across time. For example, as Knipe and Bromley (1984) report, old taboos associated with hunting and fishing are now disappearing; catches become more predictable and the occupations safer, removing the *taboo of fear*.

As already emphasised, taboos wield significant social power as they elicit predictable or expected behavior and largely go unquestioned; in this way, they contribute to the stability of societies and social groups. These benefits of observing taboos are clear in Tongan society: “As people of high rank/status are ascribed more *mana*, the basic social function of the *tapu* system is to strengthen the stratified order of Tongan” (Völkel 2021: 32). In addition to providing stability, taboos facilitate the protection of vulnerable members of society and coordinate community-wide cooperation, which serves to prevent conflict. As part of a wider belief system, shared taboos are a sign of social cohesion, and the rites and rituals that accompany taboos can provide a sense of control over situations where ordinary mortals have little or none – such as death, illness and bodily functions (Allan & Burrige 2006: 1).

When we connect the concept of *mana* to the social functions of taboo, it becomes evident that *mana*, being at the root of social power, is a key factor in the implementation of any restrictions. If the degree of social power an entity possesses is no longer influential, taboos lose their validity and must adjust or evolve; this has clear consequences at the level of language as linguistic taboos are then forced to undergo change due to newly negotiated boundaries. As reported in Lakoff (2000), English speakers have since the 1980s seen the gradual establishment of legally recognised sanctions against what might be described as “-IST language”. Political correctness, as motivated by the *taboo of social awareness*, is a pertinent example of this continual adjustment and accompanying language change within the shifting boundaries of taboo. A common linguistic strategy for politically correct language is the use of euphemisms to circumvent lexical items deemed derogatory, generally names for marginalized groups in a society. To promote tolerance and respect of vulnerable members of society, using a term that focuses on the positive characteristics of a group as opposed to the more frequent, negatively-connotated term, such as *jobseeker* for *unemployed*, becomes preferred.

A number of researchers have pointed to the instability of vocabulary within taboo areas. Any euphemistic expression will typically be short-lived. In their now famous 1957 study, Osgood et al. provide psycholinguistic support for this phenomenon. Using a technique (the ‘semantic differential’) for systematically (though subjectively) quantifying connotative meaning, they confirmed what we know from the behaviour of words over time: there is a general tendency for any derogatory or unfavourable denotation or connotation within a language expression to dominate the interpretation of its immediate context. As the negative associations reassert themselves, they undermine the euphemistic quality of the word, and the next generation of speakers grows up learning the word either as the direct term (orthophemism) or an offensive term (dysphemism). *Vagina*, for example, quickly narrowed in ordinary usage to the direct term for ‘female genitalia’ (or more usually ‘vulva’), and for many English speakers would now be among the obscenities; the original metaphorical links to Latin *vāgīna* ‘sheath, scabbard’ are now well and truly severed. McWhorter (2016) describes it this way: “Thought will always catch up with the word”. Perennial pejoration and narrowing of meaning promote an ever-changing chain of vocabulary replacements for words denoting taboo concepts – Pinker’s (2002) ‘euphemistic treadmill’ or Allan and Burridge’s (2006) ‘X-phemism mill’.

3.1.2 *Taboo breaking*

In interaction, taboos are generally recognized only when they are broken (see Schröder 2008). Taboo breaking, just like taboos themselves, is heavily context and culture dependent. It can be equated to shamelessness and can be an intentional exposure of tabooed domains. As we have seen, taboo breaking can lead to exclusion from the community through isolation or stigmatization (Schulze 2019: 51, our translation). Nonetheless, a distinction must be made in the ways in which taboos are broken, as both conscious and unconscious taboo breaches can occur. Unconscious or unintentional taboo breaking is akin to cultural misunderstandings. When visiting a foreign country for the first time, for example, there are specific customs or habits which differ from one’s home country. These are often based on differing taboos and because they are not explicitly marked or discussed, it is easy to violate them inadvertently. Conscious taboo breaking is classified as a method for highlighting social grievances and taking a stance on social issues or problems. In this way, taboo breaking functions as an important part of social development because it is a way for individuals to test boundaries and even exploit them to express their disapproval (see Kraft 2004: 177).

Schröder (2008: 62) further differentiates taboo breaking from two other processes of taboo change: the removal of taboo and temporary taboo abolishment. The removal of taboo always implies a shift in what is considered taboo. As

suggested earlier, the disappearance of taboos associated with hunting and fishing have come about because modern advances in these pursuits mean that they are no longer hazardous activities that put lives in danger. Shifts can also be due to social movements and changes in norms and values. For example, many taboos within the field of religion are less and less potent or applicable today as modern societies become increasingly secular. Temporary taboo abolishment describes how taboos do have not to be absolute, which means a transgression does not necessarily result in any punishment and is predominantly considered an emotional outlet (Schröder 2008: 62). What constitutes taboo breaking is defined either by the community or it can occur as a demonstration of power on the part of the taboo breaker (Schulze 2019: 49). It is utilized in special circumstances such as academic and scientific discourse, political discourse, mass media communication, satire as well as in social movements pushing for radical change, i.e. feminism and climate justice (Schröder 2008: 62). This ritualized and conscious taboo breaking exposes previously unmentioned taboos and continues doing so until the taboo is consolidated or removed. In this way, taboos are used to evoke thoughtfulness about the nature of transgressions and general problems that exist in society.

Burridge and Benczes (2019) also emphasize that humour provides one of the main ritual contexts for taboo violation today and serves as an important societal safety valve; people use levity as a means of disarming anxiety and discomfort by downgrading what it is they cannot cope with. As Freud theorized, “[t]he ego [...] insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure” (1927: 163).

In summary, taboos are social restrictions on action, interaction and communication (see Schröder 2008). The social functions of taboos are to guarantee stability, protection and the sustainability of communities. Taboos achieve this by preventing social conflict and serving as a method for the implementation of individual and collective identities. The avoidance and transgression of taboos is often marked by linguistic strategies, which will be discussed in the following section.

3.2 Linguistic taboo and tabooed language use

The previous section described the concept of *taboo* as a fundamental and inherent component of social behavior at large. Schulze’s definition of taboo as a relational property can be understood and applied in a modern context as: socially regulated restrictions regarding how a human being refers to or behaves towards an actor (and additional related behavior), which is determined by a certain quality attributed to the actor (see Schulze 2019: 15–16). The term *actor* here is used as

intended by Latour (1996: 2), who argues against the conceptual division of nature and humans and advocates an actor-network theory which treats both objects and humans as actors.

An “actor” in AT [actor-network theory] is a semiotic definition -an actant-, that is, something that acts or to which activity is granted by others. It implies no special motivation of human individual actors, nor of humans in general. An actant can literally be anything provided it is granted to be the source of an action.

(Latour 1996:7)

As shown in Figure 1, objects and humans are treated equally with respect to their inherent *mana* or *noa* quality, making Latour’s definition of *actor* especially suitable for discussions about taboo.

In our definition, *socially regulated* means that the restrictions are generally agreed upon in a society and they are part of common knowledge. This common knowledge is the cognitive premise for an individual’s modified behavior. In a similar manner, an actor is attributed with a certain quality which is also common knowledge to members of the society. This quality (again, *mana* versus *noa*) both justifies and requires modified, restrictive behavior. The use of language is one method for referring to or behaving in a specific manner towards an actor and, thus, is subject to modification determined by the presence of taboos. The impact of taboos on the linguistic domain is the focus of the following section.

3.2.1 Definition

If a speaker’s relationship to a certain actor is cognitively profiled as taboo, the actor cannot, in many instances, be accessed or approached directly via the articulation of their proper name (Schulze 2019: 19, 34). In other words, social restrictions may prevent the calling of things by their ‘true’ name. Thus, a *linguistic taboo* is the social restriction or outright prohibition on the use of a certain linguistic sign in certain situations. To circumnavigate a linguistic taboo, a speaker may utilize various linguistic strategies which will be subsumed in the following under the term *tabooed language use*. All utterances which can be understood as behavior toward an actor for whom socially restricted access is required are then instances of *tabooed language use*.

Before moving on to detail a few common linguistic strategies employed in tabooed language use, relevant theoretical premises in linguistics applicable to tabooed language use in particular will be discussed.

3.2.2 Theoretical perspective

In Schulze’s words, “linguistic taboos mean the conventionalized disruption of a linguistic sign (as a construction according to construction grammar) possibly

in respect to its signifier or in its use.” (Schulze 2019: 27, our translation). Every linguistic sign consists of, or is itself, a construction, according to construction grammar; and a construction is defined as a form-meaning pair whose “form or meaning is not strictly predictable from the properties of their component parts or from other constructions” (Goldberg 1995: 4). Based on Ferdinand de Saussure’s (1916) notion of the linguistic sign as an unpredictable relation between form and meaning, a morpheme as the smallest meaning-bearing linguistic unit can then be considered a construction.

As explained earlier, the cognitive premise for a linguistic taboo is that the relationship of a speaker and an actor, who may be physically present or simply referenced in the speech event, is tabooed. As a consequence, social restrictions inhibit the speaker from accessing the actor directly. In a specific speech event, this takes the form of direct linguistic access to the actor via its proper signifier, or true name, being denied. The potentially bidirectional relationship of the signifier and the signified (see Langacker 2008: 5) implies that once one of the components of the linguistic sign (typically the signified) is affected by a taboo, the other is affected through the symbolical link, as well (Schulze 2019: 15). Practically, if a speaker adheres to the social restrictions, the actor’s proper or original signifier cannot be uttered, just as it cannot be touched because reference to the actor’s name in an utterance is understood as a way of ‘touching’ it (Schulze 2019: 19). In more detail, the speaker’s relation to the actor is tabooed and that taboo is mapped onto the original symbolic link between the signified and its signifier in a linguistic sign, resulting in a modified link. The tabooed relation of a speaker to a particular actor is common knowledge within a society, making the subsequent linguistic taboo conventional as well. In this way, a linguistic taboo can be described from a theoretical perspective as the disruption of the symbolic relation of the linguistic sign.

Tabooed language use consequently has to circumnavigate the affected linguistic sign. Speakers generally utilize many creative strategies both to omit the original signifier, while still referring to the signified somehow, and to establish new symbolic links which are not (yet) subject to conventionalized restrictions by their speech community. Three strategies of tabooed language use will be detailed in the following section.

3.2.3 *Linguistic strategies*

There are numerous ways to avoid the social tabooing of a linguistic sign. This section takes a closer look at these selected linguistic strategies: *articulation shift* and its alteration of the signifier-sphere, *lexical substitution* and *special languages*.

Articulation shift refers to the modified phonological realization of a linguistic sign in the context of taboo and causes an alteration of the signifier (dubbed

‘tabooistic distortion’ in Hock 1991). The logic behind this linguistic strategy is twofold. First, it is assumed that the tabooed reference to or naming of an actor would result in the speaker being cursed by the actor themselves or otherwise negatively afflicted. For this reason, their direct reference is prohibited. If the articulation or speech sounds are altered, the actor’s name will not be heard because the retrieved image or concept will also be altered, bypassing the taboo (Schulze 2019: 28). An example in English, though its use is outdated, is the phrase *swelp me Bob* expressed to avoid articulating *so help me God*; more recent examples are camouflaged cuss words such as *crumbs!* or *cripes!*. A similar example in French is the interjection *parbleu!* articulated in place of *pardieu!* meaning ‘for the love of God!’. In these examples, the lexemes *God*, *Christ* and *Dieu* are distorted as the acoustic realizations and their associated concepts diverge. As a consequence, the original concept is either partially retrieved or not retrieved at all and its signifier remains concealed. Figure 2 details a form of this distortion in the linguistic sign called *assonant articulation*. Assonant articulation applies to the speech sound shift in one word or a name, not a whole phrase, as a way to avoid taboo. The example depicted below is *crumbs* and its manufactured connection to *Christ* by the shared speech sounds in both words.

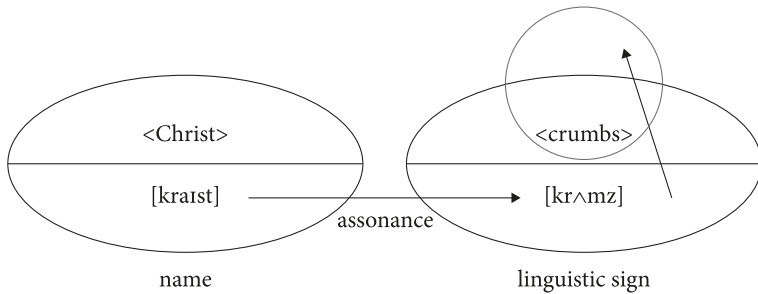


Figure 2. Assonant articulation (an adaptation of Schulze 2019: 26)

Uttering *crumbs* in place of *Christ* interferes with the traditional relationship of the signifier and signified, shifting the retrieved concept from the tabooed reference to Jesus Christ to *crumbs*. In rare instances, the frequent and/or long-term use of assonant articulation can result in the subsequent tabooing of the related concept; applying that process to this example, the concept of *crumbs* would possibly acquire the same social restrictions as *Christ* (Schulze 2019: 26).

Other strategies related to the articulation of tabooed linguistic signs include whispering or talking around something which can result in an incomprehensible assertion or even silence as in the following example, “then we went to bed [...] later I lit a cigarette” (Schulze 2019: 54). Although events are missing from the

chronology here, the silence in between going to bed and lighting a cigarette imply that sex occurred without its direct reference. Overarticulation of a syllable in a similar word or expression can also be employed to avoid a tabooed expression. This is typically done with an imprecise or even nonsense expression as is the case with *Scheibenkleister* in German, which literally translated means ‘paste disk,’ used in place of *Scheiße* ‘shit’ where the first syllable is overarticulated to both signal the resemblance to the tabooed expression and sidestep its direct use. The signifier can also be altered through metathesis, or the switching of syllables in a word.

For example, in the Ngariawang variety of the Guruf dialect of Adzera, the word for ‘woman’ is *kasat*, while in all other dialects it is *sagat*. Other words in Ngariawang indicate that metathesis of syllables was formerly a common phenomenon, so this may have been used to modify taboo words. (Holzknecht 1988: 57)

Lexical substitution is another technique for circumventing linguistic taboos; a lexical item or a whole phrase which shares common traits with the linguistic taboo is utilized in its place. A thorough description of the correlation between the linguistic taboo and its lexical substitute is facilitated by our definition of a linguistic taboo and is visually represented in Figure 3 below (see Schulze 2019: 33–34). If a linguistic taboo refers to a linguistic sign whose use society has restricted in certain situations, then the articulation of a linguistic taboo, or its signifier, in addition to its concept, or the signified, is restricted.

With lexical substitution, another linguistic sign that shares characteristics with the tabooed linguistic sign is forcibly connected to it. Thus, two independent linguistic signs are combined when one is lexically substituting for the other. Rather than simply having the traditional one-to-one ratio of signified to signifier, this results in a more complex relationship between a concept and its articulation; two concepts are signified simultaneously with one expressed articulation. The context in which this occurs is the key to linking the expressed articulation with its correlated tabooed counterpart. For example, *Teufel* ‘devil’ in German is avoided by the substitution of *der Gehörnte* ‘the horned one,’ which refers to a physical characteristic of the devil.

The use of technical terms or a foreign loanword can serve as a substitute, as well. A similar process as detailed above occurs in these cases, though it is important to note that foreign language expressions are not subject to taboo to the same extent as native expressions. For example, Latin terms in Standard English for bodily effluvia such as *expectorate* and *faeces* are much less tabooed than *spit* and *shit*. Antiphrasis is another frequently used form of lexical substitution in which a tabooed concept is referenced by the articulation of its opposite. In the phrase *he is a blessed fool*, for example, *blessed* is articulated instead of the socially restricted

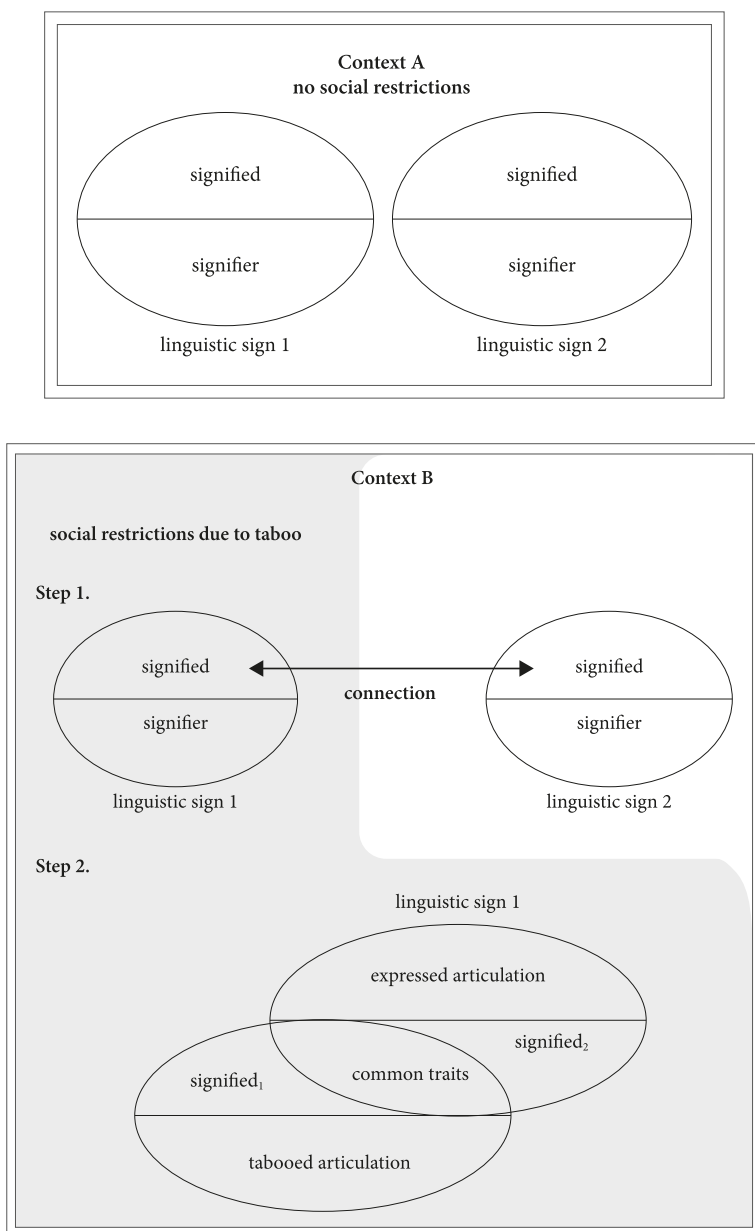


Figure 3. The transformation of a linguistic sign during lexical substitution in the context of social restrictions due to taboo (an elaboration of Schulze 2019: 33)

damned. As both expressions invoke the same meaning, the linguistic taboo can be circumvented without risking any misunderstanding (Schulze 2019: 35–38).

A separate communication system, *Sondersprachen* or ‘special languages’, can also be used to get around linguistic taboos. These are used by certain social groups to achieve various goals, including, but not limited to, signaling ingroup membership, deceiving outsiders and averting physical or social danger. Prohibitions on the interaction between non-blood relatives of different sexes are based on an historical sexual taboo (see Schulze 2009: 36–37). This affects the level of language by restricting direct communication in particular speaker-listener constellations. For example, communication between a man and his mother- or daughter-in-law, or a woman and her father- or son-in-law will either be avoided or only occur within the confines of honorifics, as in Tongan (see Völkel 2021: this volume), or even a separate communication system such as mother-in-law language. In the Australian Aboriginal language Yidiny, a mother can say to her son in the absence of her son-in-law *ɲayu ɲinaŋ ɲaru walba* ‘I sit on the stone’, whereas in the presence of her son-in-law, she expresses *ɲayu ɲiya:rɲiy diŋu:ndu* ‘I sit stone’. This example also shows the general tendency of reduction of the lexicon and the preference for generic terms (Schulze 2019: 4).

Special languages develop from the frequent use of linguistic strategies to avoid taboo and become stand-alone communication systems over time. An apt example of this is *Verlan* in French whose name is a syllabic metathesis of *à l’envers* ‘the wrong way around’. As its name suggests, words in *Verlan* stem from French, but the syllables are consistently inverted so that *daube* ‘marijuana’ becomes *bedo* and *calibre* ‘pistol’ becomes *brélic* (Schulze 2019: 31). The first use of *Verlan* as a jargon dates back to the nineteenth century when a convict utilized syllabic metathesis to conceal his name in a published letter. It was used at this time as a slang code for the language of prisoners, convicts and the underworld (Lefkowitz 1991: 51). In the late twentieth century, it spread further to adolescents in Parisian suburbs after its use in French hip hop (Lefkowitz 1991: 55). A well-known example is the name of the Belgian artist *Stromae*, which is *Verlan* for *maestro*. In French hip-hop *Verlan* represents an exclusive, coded language for youths, not easily understood by adults and tabooed for other social groups or in formal situations as Doran (2004: 104) remarks: “*Verlan* was above all a language meant to be used *entre potes* (among buddies) in peer social situations – *quand on galere, pour s’amuser* (when we are hanging out, to have fun) – and not one to be used with adults or in more formal situations.”

Though Schulze went into great detail in his lectures and last keynote speech describing many different linguistic strategies for circumnavigating taboo, we have detailed just a few here, namely: (1) articulation shift, which intentionally modifies the signifier, or acoustic realization, of a tabooed linguistic sign, (2) lexical substitution by paraphrasis, antiphrasis or using a loanword and (3) special languages which develop from the frequent use of the aforementioned strategies,

among others, over an extended period of time. Such strategies, in addition to instances of taboo breaking, ultimately lead to language change, bucking predictable trends of language development and allowing ever-changing societal restrictions to leave a (sometimes lasting) mark.

4. Conclusion

Having reviewed the definitions adopted for this formal and functional typology of circumnavigating taboos, we now return to the concepts of *mana* and *noa*. Taboo describes the socially regulated restrictions regarding access to actors possessing *mana* and is a relational property between *noa* and *mana* (Schulze 2019: 13, 15, 16). A linguistic taboo is then the social restrictions on the reference to or use of a certain linguistic sign in certain situations. All utterances, which are understood as directed towards or approaching an actor for which socially restricted access applies, are instances of tabooed language use. Such a definition can apply in all socio-cultural contexts and thus capture a broader understanding of taboo and linked phenomena than has been previously offered. It succeeds in connecting the taboos of traditional Polynesian cultures with the social sanctions placed on behaviour regarded as distasteful or impolite within a given social context in contemporary societies.

As described earlier, the specific social restrictions resulting from tabooed relations differ widely from community to community, as do the ramifications for those who violate sanctioned restrictions. The purpose of taboo is, however, universal: social stability, protection and sustainability. Linguistic taboos serve as an integral part of the general social function of language. In this way, we recognize taboo as an essential dimension of language, as crucial to the proper understanding of a speaker's meaning as the categories of grammar, such as tense, aspect, mood, etc.

References

- Allan, Keith & Kate Burridge. 2006. *Forbidden words: Taboo and censoring of language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511617881>
- Allan, Keith (ed.). 2019. *The Oxford handbook of taboo words and language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198808190.001.0001>
- Burridge, Kate & Réka Benczes. 2019. Taboo as a driver of language change. In Keith Allan (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Taboo Words and Language*, 180–199. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Cook, James. 1821a. *The three voyages of Captain James Cook round the world: Complete in seven volumes. Vol. V, being the first of the third voyage*. London: Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown. <https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.6760>
- Cook, James. 1821b. *The three voyages of Captain James Cook round the world: Complete in seven volumes. Vol. VII, being the third of the third voyage*. London: Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown. <https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.6760>
- Doran, Meredith. 2004. Negotiating between Bourge and Racaille: Verlan as youth identity practice in suburban Paris. In Aneta Pavlenko & Adrian Blackledge (eds.), *Negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts*, 93–124. Bristol: Channel View Publications. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781853596483-006>
- Douglas, Mary. 1966. *Purity and danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. New York: Praeger Publishers.
- Durkheim, Émile. [1897] 1963. *Incest: The nature and origin of the taboo*. New York: Lyle Stuart.
- Frazer, Sir James George. [1890] 1911. *The Golden Bough Part II: Taboo and the perils of the soul*. London: Macmillan.
- Freud, Sigmund. [1927] 1961. Humor. In James Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XXI (1927-1931): The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and Its Discontents and Other Works*, 159–166.
- Freud, Sigmund. [1913] 1991. *Totem und Tabu: Einige Übereinstimmungen im Seelenleben der Wilden und der Neurotiker*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer-Taschenbuch.
- Goldberg, Adele. 1995. *Constructions: A construction grammar approach to argument structure*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hock, Hans Henrich. 1991. *Principles of Historical Linguistics*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110219135>
- Holzknacht, Susanne. 1988. Word taboo and its implications for language change in the Markham family of languages, PNG. *Kivung* 18. 43–69.
- Knipe, Edward & David G. Bromley. 1984. Speak no evil: Word taboos among Scottish fishermen. In Ray Browne (ed.), *Forbidden Fruit: Taboos in American Culture*, 183–192. Bowling Green: Popular Culture Press.
- Korn, Daniel, Charlie Hawes & Mark Radice. 2001. *Cannibal: The history of the people-eaters*. London: Channel 4 Books.
- Kraft, Hartmut. 2004. *Tabu, Magie und soziale Wirklichkeit*. Düsseldorf: Walter.
- Lakoff, Robin Tolmach. 2000. *The Language War*. Berkeley: University of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520928077>
- Langacker, Ronald W. 2008. *Cognitive grammar: A basic introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195331967.001.0001>
- Latour, Bruno. 1996. *On actor-network theory: A few clarifications plus more than a few complications*. <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/P-67%20ACTOR-NETWORK.pdf>. (12 November, 2020.)
- Lefkowitz, Natalie. 1991. *Talking backwards, looking forwards: The French language game Verlan*. Tübingen: Narr.
- McWhorter, John. 2016. *Euphemise this*. <https://aeon.co/essays/euphemisms-are-like-underwear-best-changed-frequently> (21 March, 2021.)
- Mead, Margaret. 1934. Tabu. *The Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* 14. 505–512.
- OED (The Oxford English Dictionary). 2000. John A. Simpson (ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, <http://www.oed.com> (4 November, 2020.)

- Osgood, Charles E., George J. Suci & Percy H. Tannenbaum. 1957. *The measurement of meaning*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Pinker, Steven. 2002. *The blank slate: The modern denial of human nature*. New York: Viking.
- Pizarro Pedraza, Andrea (ed.). 2018. *Linguistic taboo revisited: Novel insights from cognitive perspectives*. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110582758>
- Reutner, Ursula. 2009. *Sprache und Tabu: Interpretationen zu französischen und italienischen Euphemismen*. Tübingen: Niemeyer. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783484971219>
- Saussure, Ferdinand de. [1916] 1995. *Cours de linguistique générale*. Paris: Éditions Payot & Rivages.
- Scholz Williams, Gerhild. 2009. Sensationslust, Tabu und Scham. Öffentlichkeit und Berichterstattung im 17. Jahrhundert: Thurneysser, Pierre de Lancre, Theatrum Europaeum. In Anja Hesse & Hans-Joachim Behr (eds.), *Tabu: Über den gesellschaftlichen Umgang mit Ekel und Scham*, 75–100. Berlin: Kadmos. <http://www.theatra.de/forschung/ed000006.pdf> (14 September, 2021.)
- Schröder, Hartmut. 1999. Semiotisch-rhetorische Aspekte von Sprachtabus. *Erikoiskielet ja käännösteoria. VAKKI:n julkaisut* N:o 25, 29–50.
- Schröder, Hartmut. 2008. Zur Kulturspezifik von Tabus: Tabus und Euphemismen in interkulturellen Kontaktsituationen. In Claudia Benthien & Ortrun Gutjahr (eds.), *Tabu: Interkulturalität und Gender*, 51–70. München: Wilhelm Fink.
- Schulze, Wolfgang. 2009. *Sprachtabu. Zur Linguistik des Unsagbaren*. <http://schulzewolfgang.de/material/sprachtabu.pdf> (7 December, 2020).
- Schulze, Wolfgang. 2019. *Circumnavigating taboos: A functional and formal typology*. http://www.schulzewolfgang.de/temp/LIPP26_Tabu_Schulze.pdf. (12 November, 2020).
- Steiner, Franz. 1956. *Taboo*. London: Cohen & West Ltd.
- Völkel, Svenja. 2021. Togan honorifics and their underlying concepts of *mana* and *tapu*: A verbal taboo in its emic sense. *Pragmatics & Cognition*, this volume.

Address for correspondence

Melanie Keller
 Dept. of English & American Studies
 LMU München
 Schellingstraße 3 (RG)
 80799 München
 Germany
melanie.keller@anglistik.uni-muenchen.de

Biographical notes

Melanie Keller is a Graduate Research Assistant and Lecturer in the English Linguistics Department at LMU Munich. She is a doctoral candidate studying the emerging variety of Korean English from a Second Language Acquisition (SLA) perspective under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Stephanie Hackert (LMU Munich). Her dissertation compares the English as a

Second Language (ESL) of Korean American immigrants to English spoken by Koreans living in South Korea.

Philipp Striedl is working on his doctoral thesis with the title “Representations of Variation in Modern Hebrew in Israel: Cognitive Processes of Social and Linguistic Categorization.” He studied Islamic Studies at FU Berlin and Cultural and Cognitive Linguistics at LMU Munich. His research interests focus on the usage-based study of linguistic variation and qualitative research methodology. He has published articles on Moroccan Arabic and on linguistic phenomena in Modern Hebrew which originated in the context of the Israeli army.

Daniel Biro studied Romance Philology at LMU Munich as well as at Université Descartes and Université Sorbonne in Paris. He is currently finishing his doctorate investigating the political discourse of Romania via sentiment analysis under the supervision of PD Dr. Aurelia Merlan (LMU Munich) and Prof. Dr. Thomas Krefeld (LMU Munich).

Johanna Holzer studied Sociology at the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt and the University of Trento, Italy as well as Cultural and Cognitive Linguistics at LMU Munich. She is currently finishing her doctorate in the field of migration linguistics (dissertation working title: *Language Biographies: The Example of Young Refugees from Syria, Iran and Afghanistan*) under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Claudia Riehl (LMU Munich) and Prof. Dr. Elisabeth Knipf-Komlósi (Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), Hungary).

Kate Burridge is Professor of Linguistics at Monash University and Fellow of both the Australian Academy of the Humanities and the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia. In 2003 she took up the Chair of Linguistics in the Linguistics Program in the School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics at Monash University. Her main areas of research are language change (focus on changing vocabulary and grammar), the notion of linguistic taboo, the structure and history of English. She has authored or edited more than 20 books on different aspects of language. Her most recent books are: *Wrestling with Words and Meanings* (with Réka Benczes, 2014); *Understanding Language Change* (with Alex Bergs, 2018); *Introducing English Grammar* (with Kersti Börjars, 2019); *For the Love of Language* (with Tonya Stebbins, 2019).

Publication history

Date received: 23 December 2020

Date accepted: 18 October 2021