

INTRODUCTION

Sex, death & politics – taboos in language

Introduction

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The term *taboo* first entered the English language from Tongan in the eighteenth century. According to Keith Allan and Kate Burridge (2006:11), *taboo* “refers to a proscription of behavior for a specifiable community of one or more persons, at a specifiable time, in specifiable contexts”. A few of the semantic domains from which taboos universally arise are, as our title suggests, bodies and their functions, acts of sex, diseases and death (Allan & Burridge 2006:1). To avoid the polemical and be polite, items within these domains are generally marked by linguistic and/or other signs. Euphemistic expressions and other avoidance strategies can be used to achieve this goal; dysphemisms can also be employed to deliberately evoke the taboo in an insult or joke. Even entire communicative situations can be restricted or marked taboo, thus requiring the use of specific language varieties, such as *mother-in-law language* (see Dixon 1977).

This special issue of *Pragmatics & Cognition* is the result of original work presented at the 26th LIPP Symposium entitled “Sex, Death & Politics – Taboos in Language” held on 29–31 October 2019 in Munich, Germany. Organizing a symposium on a relatively understudied, and at times controversial, area of linguistics was an exciting challenge for us as PhD candidates at LMU Munich. Though each organizer specializes in a different linguistic field and language, we all easily agreed on the universality and relevance of this theme. With Kate Burridge and Hartmut Schröder as our keynote speakers, along with Andrea Pizarro Pedraza and the late Wolfgang Schulze, pioneer researchers on linguistic taboo were brought together in one room, which truly was a special occasion. Professor Wolfgang Schulze, who inspired the choice of this topic for the conference, delivered one of his last keynotes on this occasion before he passed away, too early. He was a dear academic mentor to many students and will be remembered for his ability to encourage young researchers to pursue their interests in diverse linguistic domains.

This volume includes seven articles by prominent and early career researchers from academic disciplines such as psycholinguistics, Slavic studies, phonology, historical linguistics, anthropology and pragmatics. The first article, written by four guest editors and Kate Burridge, surveys taboo's (very short) history as an object of linguistic study. It was a collaborative effort to synthesize and build upon Wolfgang Schulze's keynote speech and earlier research in which he proposed a wider understanding of *taboo* and sketched a typology of its circumvention.

Svenja Völkel's contribution follows with a detailed look at Tongan, the language from which *taboo* was borrowed. She applies an anthropological-linguistic approach to analyze social stratification, cultural practices and honorifics in relation to the Tongan concepts of *mana* and *tapu* based on her own fieldwork on the island. Her work reveals that honorifics are not only used to show deference to higher social ranks; they are also used together with physical avoidance practices. The often-overlooked meaning of *tapu* as 'avoidance and prohibition' is highlighted here.

In the third article, shifting gender roles in post-Soviet contexts are clear from Cristiana Lucchetti's survey data in which Russian speakers reflect on their use of *mat*, or 'obscene language'. Traditional patriarchal notions, such as that of women's inherent purity, manifested in the linguistic conventions ascribed to different genders are discussed and actively challenged by Russian-speaking women in their responses. *Mat* usage is no longer considered taboo for women in all contexts, as it was decades earlier.

The fourth contribution in this volume asks an intriguing question: is there a way that a word can 'sound taboo' or 'sound like a swear word'? Robin Vallery and Maarten Lemmens test claims suggesting that an unconscious sound-symbolic association exists in English swear words. They utilize an English swear word database to see if specific phoneme categories occur more frequently in real and fictional swear words. After compiling a parallel database of French swear words, the authors perform the same tests to real and fictional French swear words in search of phonological systematicity. They conclude that there does seem to be sound symbolism present in English and French swear words, specifically with respect to sonority.

Philipp Heidepeter and Ursula Reutner examine how humor twists the normal use of euphemisms on the illocutionary level. Analyzing euphemisms in English, German, French, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish from different periods and genres, they construct a typology of twisted euphemism use with four types. All types share the same motivations of amusement, distraction and entertainment, while differing in the styles they employ.

Nicholas Lo Vecchio describes the basic lexicon related to the taboo domains of homosexuality and non-normative gender identity that is shared across several

European languages in the sixth article. He categorizes the framing devices that these internationalisms, like *sodomite*, *homosexual* and *gay*, convey. In doing so, he outlines the historical trajectory of queerness as a pragmatically marked semantic field.

In the final contribution of this volume, Daniel Edmondson investigates linguistic reclamation from a psycholinguistic perspective. For this study, he collected individual ratings from British English speakers of 41 LGBTQ+ slurs for various word properties and measures of linguistic reclamation. From these ratings, he was able to produce a database of normed ratings of LGBTQ+ slurs that is the first of its kind. Edmondson observes several key relationships between word properties and reclamation behaviors that offer exciting avenues for further experimental research.

This collection is a testament to the quality of the research featured in 2019. Starting with a foundational grasp of *taboo* as a concept and ending with measuring the linguistic reclamation of slurs, unique work and creative methods are presented that focus on domains of life intended for the periphery. We recognize this as a valuable contribution to the wider study of linguistic taboo and appreciate the opportunity to make our conference proceedings available to a broader audience.

References

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