



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Iranian Adult Speakers' Perceptions toward Linguistic Taboos and Euphemisms in Iranian Society: A Sociolinguistic View

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In recent years, the line of research on the socio-pragmatic aspects of language and language use has been increasing very rigorously. In this regard, taboos as well as euphemisms, due to their significant role in impacting on the interactions among interlocutors, have been the subject of research in various societies and cultures from a vast variety of aspects. That being so, the present study was an attempt to explore the perceptions of Iranian adult speakers of linguistic taboos and euphemisms in Iranian society. To achieve this aim, a convenient sample of 48 Iranian adult speakers, 24 males and 24 females, from Shiraz, Iran was recruited to participate in the study. The researcher interviewed them one by one and audio recorded their answers for further analysis and to determine their perceptions of linguistic taboos and euphemisms in Iranian society. The findings indicated that: a. Most of the participants believed that sex is the most offensive topic in Iranian society; b. All of the participants believed that people should use euphemisms in their speech and should take after of their speech especially in formal situations; c. Most of the Iranian adult speakers believed that the most important factor which leads to the use of taboo words is anger; and d. Most of the participants, both male and female, said they do not discuss taboo topics in mixed-sex groups.

Keywords: Death, Euphemisms, Society, Perceptions, Sex, Taboo.

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Introduction

Sociolinguistics is a branch of Linguistics, which studies language and its use in society. Language, in fact, is fundamental to social interaction in all societies and the relationship between language and society is intertwined. Every society also has norms and rules regarding the use of taboos. For people, a taboo word is simply a word that causes negative feelings and attitudes when used.

Regarding contents, users' identities and genders, in light of different societies, the attitudes towards taboo language and its function is undergoing change (Gao, 2008). Taboo is one aspect of social structure that is reflected in both language and action. Akindele and Adegbite (1999) believe that taboo language is characterized as being concerned with some behaviors, actions or expressions that are not unforbidden, moral or proper. On the other hand, Jay (1999, 164) suggests that taboo words could be either positive or negative in a way that it depends on "circumstances like joking and sexual enticement, but it could be negative when used to harm someone like name-calling and sexual insults."

Definitions considering euphemisms do not differ very much. Euphemisms are described as soft and softer expressions used to substitute dispreferred terms, which are not proper to be used in a society. According to Holder (2008) euphemism which is a moderate or uncertain term is used to replace an unsuitable or impertinent expression. Euphemisms are often referred to as negatively perceived social actions, which is a shame for a speaker to mention directly. Burrige (2004) claims that when we refer to topics like war or killing euphemistically, those topics might appear tolerable.

The fact is that language and culture are inseparable; therefore, taboos as parts of a language are inseparable too (Wardhaugh, 1999). Given this, having sensitive nature, taboo words were always an interesting subject to linguists; however, they have not been taken much into account. The studies of taboo words academically are not paid attention that much in Asian countries, particularly in the Middle East countries like Iran. Given the importance of investigating taboo language and euphemisms especially in the context of Iran, the present study is an attempt to investigate the perception of Iranian adult speakers toward taboo language and euphemisms.

Literature Review

Scholars across the world have put the topic of linguistic taboos and euphemisms into investigation in different societies. The study of taboo language is always seen as inappropriate for academic research because of the sensitivity of its nature, although it exists in all human cultures.

Investigating Swedish-speaking students of English in Swedish high school and their understanding of and attitudes to taboo language in English, Habibovic's (2010) study consisted of 28 students in two different parts. The first part was conducted with two classes of first year of high school studying the hotel and hospitality trade program in the South of Sweden. The first class included 16 students, nine females and seven males. The second class consisted of eight students, four females and four males. The first part of the study consisted of a short text, provided by the researcher where teenagers were supposed to underline words and phrases they believed to be taboos.

The second part of the study was conducted after the first part with the same two classes. This time the first class consisted of 13 students, three males and nine females and one student who was not present in this study as a result of him/her marking both female student and male student in the questionnaire. The second class consisted of 20 students, eleven females and nine males. The second part of the study consisted of a questionnaire where the students had to answer questions about their frequency of taboo usage as well as their attitudes.

The result showed that females indicated more understanding of taboo and also showed more attitudes towards taboo than the males did. Also, the result revealed that females' frequency of taboo usage is higher than the males.

Also, Tekin (2011) investigated Turkish EFL students' attitudes towards class discussion of two topics which were generally perceived as taboo in the Turkish society, namely homosexuality and adultery/pre-marriage sex, for the purpose of examining the motivational value of such topics in EFL speaking classes. The study also aimed at analyzing Turkish students' reactions to the materials and activities which were used in a lesson on homosexuality and adultery/pre-marriage sex. To reach these ends, questionnaires were administered before and after the discussions. The participants were asked how disturbing and embarrassing they found the materials and activities used during these discussions. The results showed that the students both enjoyed and learned a lot during these discussions and they did not find the materials and activities used in these lessons disturbing at all. In fact,

statistical analysis of the related survey items revealed that the participants have positive attitudes towards the whole idea and process of using taboo topics in the classroom.

In addition, Jay and Jay (2013) conducted two studies in one paper. They aimed to provide descriptive data about the emergence of adult-like swearing in children. The studies, specifically, attempted to document what words children of different age groups know and use. Study 1 provided observational data from adults and children (ages 1–12). Study 2, on the other hand, compared the perceptions of the inappropriateness of taboo words between adults and older (ages 9–12) and younger (ages 6–8) children. Although children and adults differed in their assessments of the inappropriateness of soft taboo words, the findings revealed that by the time children enter school they have the rudiments of adult swearing.

In a study, Ni Fanni (2014) investigated the usage of English swear words among Chinese youths and compared the use of swear words between male and female youths. The participants were seventy-four students studying at a private secondary school in the state of Selangor. Instruments of the survey included a 26-item questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with focus groups. The results indicated that the main reason for swearing among both genders was anger. However, male youths also stated that the need of self-identity and the use of swear words were also due to peer influence. Female youths, on the other hand, indicated that swearing was related to emotions. The study also revealed that male youths tended to swear more in the same gender group while female youths tended to do so more in mixed gender group. The results also indicated that the presence of different genders in the environment largely affects male language choice but not the female speakers.

Ghounane (2014) conducted a study and investigated Algerian culture regarding language use through investigating linguistic taboos and euphemistic usage. The percentages of both taboos and euphemistic usage were nearly the same, although statistical analysis of the questionnaire revealed that the respondent's attitudes are highly positive towards taboos. The results also showed that Algerian people try to discuss taboo topics in single sex groups depending on their age and gender. Finally, the findings confirmed that sex has remained as the most tabooed topic, while death is also dealt with care in Algerian society.

However, the number of studies done in Muslim countries including Iran has been limited since most of the taboo words are rooted in people's religious,

traditional, and political beliefs and viewpoints (Samadi, 2014). In this regard, Abdollahzadeh (2017) conducted a study to investigate the influence of gender differences in proscribed language use by Iranian EFL university students which is part of a checklist provided by Culpeper (1996) as acts of impoliteness. The subjects were male and female university students each consisting of 20 students within the range of 30-40 years of age. The instrument used to elicit data was a questionnaire including ten items. By calculating frequencies of answers, the analyzing data revealed that against the traditional beliefs, both males and females believed that there is no double standard assuming that while men might use proscribed language, women are limited to use so. Besides, data showed both male and female use more taboo words at home and in same-sex context. They both stated that they use them very few and when they are angry. The findings indicated that it was the Persian language male participants used to speak the taboo language, but the females mainly used English or other languages.

Given the importance of using taboo languages and euphemisms in all the societies, the need for attempting to investigate the perceptions held by Iranian adult speakers concerning linguistic taboos and euphemisms in Iranian society has been felt. One should note that research on taboos and euphemisms is vast since they are heavily used in all societies and most studies, which are done in these two fields, have been piloted by Western researchers and few works have been done by Iranian scholars. The analysis of such phenomena has been scattered since it pertains to the culturally sensitive areas which have only received a lot of academic attention in the last few decades. So, the present study is an attempt to shed more light on this issue.

To achieve the goals of the present study, the following research questions have been raised:

1. What are the attitudes of Iranian adult speakers towards the use of taboos and euphemisms?
2. What are the reasons behind the use of taboos based on the perceptions of Iranian adult speakers?
3. Do Iranian adult speakers discuss taboo topics in mixed-sex groups?

Methodology

Participants

Iranian adults, male and female, were the survey group in this study to find out their perceptions toward linguistic taboos and euphemisms in Iranian society. To

achieve this aim, a convenient sample of 48 adults, 24 males and 24 females, constituted the participants of this study. They were chosen to participate in this study based on convenient sampling procedure as it was not practically possible for the researchers to choose them randomly. All of them were from Shiraz, Fars province, and spoke Persian as their mother tongue. Their age ranged from 22 to 36 years old.

Instruments

This study investigated the perceptions held by Iranian adults concerning linguistic taboos and euphemisms in Iranian society. Given that the present study was qualitative, the instrument utilized to collect the necessary data was interviews for all the participants. The rationale behind the interviews was to uncover participants' perceptions. The interviews were conducted in Persian for participants because the target language could have acted as a barrier to clear and concise expression of ideas. Their answers were translated into English by the researcher. The researcher, then, gave some of those translations to the participants and asked them whether they had accurately described their perceptions. This is called member check in qualitative research and contributes to the trustworthiness of the study (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh & Sorensen, 2010). There were 5 interview questions which were drawn from available literature. Each interview lasted about 10 minutes. The participants were interviewed one by one and their answers were audio recorded for further analysis. The questions were as follows:

1. *Do you use taboo languages? How often?*
2. *According to your point of view, what topics are the most offensive in taboo languages?*
3. *Do you use euphemism? Why?*
4. *In your opinion, what factors lead to the use of taboos? Could you please elaborate?*
5. *Do you discuss taboo topics in mixed-sex groups? Why?*

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

At the outset of the study, the researcher explained the purpose of the study to the participants. They were also assured that their responses would be kept confidential and they would never encounter any problems because of participating in this survey. After encouraging their reliance on the researcher, they were asked to answer the questions as honestly as possible. Then, the researcher interviewed them

one by one and audio recorded their answers. The data were analyzed to find similar themes and also compare different factors which they mentioned regarding linguistic taboos and euphemisms in Iranian society. A theme represents a level of patterned response or meaning from the data that is related to the research questions at hand.

Results and Discussion

Results of the First Research Question

In order to uncover the participants' perceptions of using taboos and euphemisms, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with all of them, 24 males and 24 females. Answering to the first interview question, unanimously all of the participants (N=48) said that they use taboo languages every day. For instance, one of the male adults said, *"well, I use taboo languages. When I'm with my friends we use taboo languages and frankly speaking, I use taboo languages every day."* As another example, one of the female participants said, *"Yes, I use taboo languages especially with my friends. Every day we go out and while we are talking, we use taboo languages every day."*

Regarding the second interview question, most of the participants, 18 males and 19 females, mentioned sex as the most offensive topic. Also, 4 females and 6 males mentioned deaths and just one of the female participants mentioned insulting religion as offensive topics in using taboo languages. As an example one of the female participants said, *"The most offensive topic in using taboo languages is sex. I just talk about sex with my close friends."* Another male participant said, *"Death is the most offensive topic. People try not to talk about death in their interactions with others."* Table 1 displays the results:

Table 1: Frequencies and Percentages of Taboo Topics

Topic	Frequency	Percentage
Sex	37	77.8
Death	10	20.83
Insulting religion	1	2.08

As the third question, unanimously all of the participants stated that they employ euphemisms in their speech. They believed that people should take after of their speech especially in formal situations. As an example, one of the female participants said, *"Yes, of course. People cannot use taboo languages in formal situations while*

they are talking about taboo topics like sex. They should employ euphemisms.” As another example, one of the male adults said, “Yes. For example, in a formal situation like university classroom one should use euphemisms while talking about offensive topics. People should take care of their languages.”

Results of the Second Research Question

In order to answer the second research question which was “*What are the reasons behind the use of taboos based on the perceptions of Iranian adult speakers?*” The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with all of the 48 participants.

The participants were asked the fourth interview question. Most of the participants, 34 participants, believed that anger is an important factor which leads to the use of taboos. Besides, 22 participants believed that reaction to others’ use of taboos is another factor in this regard. As an example, one of the male participants said, “*I think anger is the most important factor in this regard. You know, when you are angry, you cannot control yourself and may use taboo words.*” As another example, one of the female participants said, “*Well, I believe the most important factor which leads to the use of taboo words is anger. When you are angry you use taboo words. We can easily see that in our society.*” Also, one of the male participants said, “*I think when others use taboo words, especially friends, you automatically use taboo words in response. So, I believe that reaction to others’ use of taboos is a factor itself.*”

Results of the Third Research Question

In order to answer the last research question which was “*Do Iranian adult speakers discuss taboo topics in mixed-sex groups?*” The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with all of the participants.

The participants were asked the fifth interview question. Most of the male participants, 19 participants, said that they do not discuss taboo topics in mixed-sex groups while 5 of them stated that they do. On the other hand, all of the female participants said that they do not discuss taboo topics in mixed-sex groups. As an example, one of the male participants said, “*No. I use taboo words or discuss taboo topics just in male groups. I don’t do that in mixed-sex groups. That’s too bad.*” Also, one of the male participants who said he discusses taboo topics in mixed-sex groups said, “*Well yes. Some of my close friends are female. I usually discuss taboo*

topics with them as jokes or something like this.” On the other hand, one of the female participants said, “No, not at all. I just do that in groups of my close female friends. It is not good to discuss taboo topics in mixed-sex groups.” Table 2 shows the results:

Table 2: Frequency and Percentage of Discussing Taboo Topics in Mixed-Sex Groups

Participants	Frequency	Percentage
Male	19	79.16
	5	20.84
Female	24	100

Discussion of the First Research Question

Considering the above-mentioned results, the first research question of the study is answered. The question was:

"What are the attitudes of Iranian adult speakers towards the use of taboos and euphemisms?"

As the results showed, all of the participants use taboo languages every day with their friends. Most of them, 37 participants, believed that sex is the most offensive topic. Also, other participants believed that death (N=10) and insulting religious (N=1) are offensive topics. Moreover, all of the participants (N=48) believed that people should use euphemisms in their speech and should take after of their speech especially in formal situations.

These findings are in line with the findings of Ghounane (2014). The researcher found that the majority of males and females (78.18%) declared that they use taboo language, whereas other participants, who represent (21.81%), answered this question negatively. In addition, the findings of the present study revealed that most of the Iranian adults, both male and female, believed that sex is the most offensive topic. Ghounane (2014) concluded that the most offensive topic for males is insulting religion followed by the topic of sex. On the other hand, female participants thought that sex is the most offensive topic to discuss, whereas insulting religion comes after.

Regarding using euphemisms, the findings of the current study showed that all of the participants believed that people should use euphemisms in their speech. In line with these findings, Ghounane (2014) found that a great number of participants (70.90%) stated that they employ euphemisms in their speech, while (14.54%) of

them declared that they speak some expressions unconsciously. On the other hand, fewer participants (8.18%) reported that they never use euphemisms in their speech, whereas a small number (7.27%) rarely employ it.

Also, while Abdollahzadeh (2017) concluded that both male and female use more taboo words at home, the findings of this study showed that Iranian adult speakers use taboo words with their friends.

Discussion of the Second Research Question

Considering the above-mentioned results, the second research question of the study is answered. The question was:

“What are the reasons behind the use of taboos based on the perceptions of Iranian adult speakers?”

Most of the Iranian adult speakers (N=34) believed that the most important factor which leads to the use of taboo words is anger. Some of them, 22 participants, also believed that reaction to others' use of taboos is another factor.

These findings are in line with the results of Ni Fanni (2014) who concluded that anger was the main reason for swearing among both males and females. Although male youths stated that the need of self-identity and the use of swear words were also due to peer influence, female youths indicated that swearing was linked to emotions. Also, in line with the findings of this study, Abdollahzadeh (2017) found that all the participants believed that anger is the main reason which causes using taboo words.

Discussion of the Third Research Question

Considering the above-mentioned results, the last research question of the study is answered. The question was:

“Do Iranian adult speakers discuss taboo topics in mixed-sex groups?”

As the results showed 19 of the male participants said they do not discuss taboo topics in mixed-sex groups, while five of the male participants answered oppositely. Also, all of the female participants stated that they do not to discuss taboo topics in mixed-sex groups.

These findings are in contrast to the findings of Ni Fanni (2014) who found that male youths tend to swear more in the same gender group while female youths tend to swear more in mixed gender group. But, the findings of the present study are in

line with the findings of Abdollahzadeh (2017). She found that both male and female use more taboo words in same-sex context.

It has been assumed to understand cultural issues and human behavior, it is essential to understand the sociocultural aspects of language including taboos (Malmkjær, 2002).

Conclusion

The present study was conducted to investigate the perception of Iranian adult speakers toward taboo language and euphemisms.

To achieve this aim, a convenient sample of 48 Iranian adult speakers, 24 males and 24 females, from Shiraz was recruited to participate in the study. The researcher interviews with all of the participants to gather the data. Results of the study demonstrated that, all of the participants use taboo languages every day with their friends. 37 of the participants believed that sex is the most offensive topic, and 11 participants believed that death and insulting religious are other offensive topics. Moreover, all of the participants believed that people should use euphemisms in their speech and should take after of their speech especially in formal situations.

As the findings indicated, 34 of the Iranian adult speakers believed that the most important factor which leads to the use of taboo words is anger. Also 22 participants believed that reaction to others' use of taboos is another factor. Finally, 19 participants said they do not discuss taboo topics in mixed-sex groups, while five of the male participants answered oppositely. Also, all of the female participants stated that they do not to discuss taboo topics in mixed-sex groups.

This study, like most other studies, suffers from some limitations. One of the limitations of this study is that the findings of the study may not be generalizable to other people or contexts. The reason is obviously lack of random sampling procedures because from a practical point of view, it was not possible for the researcher to recruit the participants randomly; and therefore, he had to choose the participants based on a convenient sampling procedure by selecting those who were available to him. This, of course, makes us approach the findings of this study more cautiously.

The second limitation concerns the small sample size; that is, a limited number of Iranian adult speakers participated in this study, which cannot properly represent the whole population of adult speakers in Iran. Moreover, the tabooed subjects

analyzed may differ from one social class to another and from one period of time to the other.

Other studies can investigate other social classes' perception toward taboo language and euphemisms. Also, other studies can compare male and female perception toward this issue. Further, since taboos are not limited to the 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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ادراک گویشوران بالغ ایرانی درباره‌ی تابوهای زبانی و حسن تعبیر در جامعه‌ی ایران: دیدگاه جامعه‌شناختی

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در سال‌های اخیر، خط‌مشی تحقیق در مورد جنبه‌های اجتماعی و عمل‌گرا در مورد زبان و استفاده از زبان به‌شدت افزایش یافته است. در این راستا تابوها و همچنین حسن تعبیر، باتوجه‌به نقش مهمی که در تأثیر بر تعامل میان مخاطبان دارند، موضوع پژوهش در جوامع و فرهنگ‌های مختلف از جنبه‌های متنوع زیادی بوده است. به‌این‌ترتیب، مطالعه‌ی حاضر تلاشی برای کشف ادراک گویشوران بالغ ایرانی از تابوهای زبانی و حسن تعبیر در جامعه‌ی ایران است. برای این منظور، نمونه‌ای مناسب از ۴۸ گویشور بالغ ایرانی، ۲۴ مرد و ۲۴ زن از شیراز، ایران برای شرکت در این مطالعه انتخاب شد. محقق با همه‌ی آن‌ها مصاحبه کرد و پاسخ‌های صوتی آنان را برای تحلیل بیشتر و تعیین ادراکات آن‌ها در مورد تابوهای زبانی و حسن تعبیر در جامعه‌ی ایران ثبت کرد. یافته‌های این یافته‌ها نشان داد: ۱. اکثر شرکت‌کنندگان معتقد بودند که جنسیت توهین‌آمیزترین موضوع در جامعه‌ی ایران است؛ ۲. همه‌ی شرکت‌کنندگان معتقد بودند که مردم باید در صحبت‌های خود از حسن تعبیر استفاده کنند و به‌خصوص در موقعیت‌های رسمی، باید مراقب صحبت‌های خود باشند؛ ۳. اکثر گویشوران بالغ ایرانی معتقدند خشم مهم‌ترین عاملی است که منجر به استفاده از کلمات تابو می‌شود و ۴. اکثر شرکت‌کنندگان، چه مرد و چه زن، گفتند که در گروه‌های مختلط جنسی درباره‌ی تابوها بحث نمی‌کنند.

واژه‌های کلیدی: مرگ، حسن تعبیر، جامعه، ادراک، جنسیت، تابو.

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