

□ A CONTRASTIVE STUDY OF SOME
LINGUISTIC TABOOS
AND THEIR EUPHEMISMS IN KABYLE AND
SOUTHERN ENGLISH COMMUNITIES

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I would like first to relate our study to the central idea of the meeting which is the relationship between Language, Culture and Translation Dealing with linguistic taboos and euphemisms is first, meant to be a hint to the existence of this linguistic fact in two genetically and culturally distant languages: e.g. English and Kabyle.

Second, even if the used euphemisms are sometimes, culture specific, the notion of equivalence is in most cases possible, and more often than expected, amazingly similar at the semantic and field levels as our sociolinguistic study will show. In fact, Sociolinguistics encourages among other studies « L'étude des jugements portés sur les niveaux de langues, notamment les déclarations du type dites ne dites pas ... méritent à plus d'un titre d'être objet ». (Dictionnaire de la Linguistique, 1980: 444.5).

As far as the methodology is concerned we have divided our work into theoretical and practical parts. In the first part we will give a general view about the taboo as a universal linguistic fact mentioning its definition, and origins. It will be followed by the description of the aims and features of euphemisms related partly to human body and its excretions and partly to some places. In the second part we will

present recapitulating tables of euphemisms in English and Kabyle. Our data are collected from Ouadhias (Kabylie) .. and a Southern English informant living in Tizi-Ouzou.

Throughout his life, the human being faces a set of things and actions, some of them are subject to restriction, others not. Indeed since his childhood, the individual's speech and behavior should be controlled, so as to be in harmony with the social norms.

This implies that the individual's liberty is somehow limited, he cannot do or say what he wants. These restrictions are related to the phenomenon known as "taboo". The taboo can be presented in two forms: practices, concerning the restrictions related to the use or the touching of a given object, and to language; in the case of the linguistic taboo, one has either to keep silent, or to utter it through an euphemism; from this point, we deduce that there is a close relationship between taboos and euphemisms.

PART I: TABOOS AND EUPHEMIMS

1. Definition of the taboo

The taboo is a social and universal phenomenon. It represents one of the most ancient oral codes of humanity, which are transmitted from one generation to another. Originally the word "taboo" comes from the Polynesian word "tapu" or "tabu", meaning something sacred, special dangerous or unclean (The World Book encyclopedia, 1986: 5).

This concept was soon adopted by English and other Western languages, as well as by other parts of the world. Generally, the taboo is considered as a conventional social restriction and interdiction. It can have a scientific explanation, but in most cases, it is based on irrational reasons and on details that seem to be without values. The prohibitions could be related either to a behaviour, to an object, to a place, or to a person. Indeed, some practices or thing are considered sacred and forbidden for the general use.

A glance at the history of the study of the taboo phenomenon shows a certain divergence between different branches of research. According to the ideas of the anthropologist Frazer, taboo is a system of religious and ritual prohibitions, and a negative aspect of magic. (G. Frazer in his article "taboo" in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1999: 598). To the ethnologists, the taboo is related to supernatural powers. Its transgression leads automatically to a curse. In addition to that, in psychology and social sciences, the term refers to practices that are generally prohibited because of religious or social pressures. For instance, incest is forbidden in most societies. In this respect, Sigmund Freud in *Totem et Tabous* considered that the taboo is related either to something sacred or disquieting.

Thus, the taboo prevents people from doing what unconscious desires impel them towards. Besides, George Mounin gave a more explicit specific definition to the taboo phenomenon. In *Dictionnaire de la Linguistique* he wrote:

"tabou": désigne l'interdiction d'un mot pour des raisons religieuses, sociales, culturelles ou autres. On l'évite par l'euphémisme, se servant ironiquement de l'apocope. Sartre a intitulé une pièce "La P ... respectueuse", évitant (apparemment) un mot tabou. (G.M. Dictionnaire de la linguistique 1955: 321).

While E. Destaing, in *Interdiction de Vocabulaire en Berber*, said that for the Chleuhs prononcer un mot obscène se servir "du langage de la bergerie" c'est s'avilir et s'attirer le mépris de son entourage" (E. Destaing, 1925: 180).

The taboo as a social phenomenon occurs in the ordinary life of all the people, without any class distinction. It is mainly manifested through forbiddance. The origin of the Taboo goes back to the early existence of the human kind. In fact, the first man and woman, Adam and Eve witnessed its effect. As they came out of paradise, both bare, they got ashamed of seeing each other's nakedness, and realised that this was not permitted (shameful).

1. The notion of shame is reinforced in the child's mind since his early childhood through education: thus, he is learnt how to distinguish between what is allowed and what is immoral, improper, or "Aib/Hchouma" as explained by (N. Zerdoumi, 1979: 190). Moreover the taboo is related to the fear of danger and pollution. In *Purity and Danger*, Marry Douglas clarifies that taboos "are inspired by fear and precaution", thus our idea intercourse, with menstruating woman is prohibited by Islamic religion because it represents danger for both partners as it is referred to in Sourat El Baqara.

In addition to that, it is worth mentioning that the phenomenon is reinforced nearly in all societies. It is done mainly by the mass media (television, radio, newspapers ...). As a matter of fact, this is clear in the Kabbylian community as well as in the southern English one. For instance, taboo words are mentioned in the Kabbylian radio. Even if a taboo subject is tackled, it is dealt with in a pure scientific way. Similarly, the English radio BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) « has, on some occasions, gone to considerable technical length to ensure that telephone contributions from the public to certain radio program broadcast live, could be cut off if they contained taboo words. One can infer that they are worried, or perhaps, even frightened by the prospect of the use of certain words, or the effect of their use. It has also been suggested that one reason for general exclusion of uneducated people from widespread participation in broadcast programs, is the fear that they will not "know the rules" about taboos » (P. Trudgill, 1988: 29).

Very often, the transgression of a taboo leads to a punishment or to a public shame. Generally, they are manifested through the rejection of the transgressor by the members of society, who consider him to be anti-conventional and immoral. Furthermore, the transgression can also imply the idea of misfortune and trouble, such as sickness and death. In this respect, S. Freud has said: « ... la transgression d'un tabou a pour sanction un chatiment, le plus souvent une grave maladie ou la mort » (S. Freud, 1976: 85).

To avoid such punishment, people usually tend to avoid the transgression of practical taboos, and substitute the linguistic ones. This substitution is achieved by the use of euphemisms. So, what is an euphemism, and why is it used?

2. EUPHEMISMS

2.1. Definition of euphemism

Euphemism is defined in the Hutchinson Encyclopaedia as: « a figure of speech whose name in Greek means speaking well (of some thing). To speak or write euphemistically is to use a milder, less direct expression rather than one that is considered too vulgar or direct » Hutchinson Encyclopaedia, 199: 373).

More explicitly, E. Partridge reported in his book entitled *Usage and Abusage* that: « in the Romance of Words, Professor Ernest weakly speaks of euphemism as "that form of speech which avoids calling things by their names" and observes that it results from "various human instincts which range from religious reverence down to human decency" (..) too often, it is an indication of prudery or an exaggerated genteelism » (E. Partridge, 1995: 108).

The technique of euphemism consists of substituting a taboo word of expression by a permitted one. This substitution is both universal and ancient, exactly as the taboo is. That is to say euphemism has existed and still exists among all the communities. To illustrate this, we refer to what Charles II has said during his reign as reported by ph. Howard, quoting Th. B. Laconics: « a certain worthy divine at Whitehall thus addressed himself to the auditory at the conclusion of his sermon: "In short, if you don't live up the precepts of the Gospel, but abandon yourselves to your irregular appetites, you must expect to receive your reward in a certain place which 'tis not good manners to mention here". (Thomas Brown, Laconcis; 1707) in Philip Howard, *The State of Language*, 1986). Here one can understand that the speaker avoided a taboo word which is probably "hell" ».

2.2. Change and euphemisms

Euphemisms are not static. They change from society to society, and from age to another. In other words, euphemisms substitute words that are associated with subjects banned by society. However, through time, these substitutes would leave exactly the same impression as the taboo word. So, in turn, it should be substituted, since it is the object not the word that is indecent. In this respect, G. Leech said: « the unpleasant connotations of a word are, after all, not the fault of the word itself, but of what it refers to. So, the euphemistic expression which replaces the original term soon gets tarred with the same brush » (G. Leech, 1981-45).

This idea explains why there exist many euphemisms for a single word, as it is for "toilet". This English word is substituted by: "privy", "WC", "lavatory", "bathroom", and more recently by "loo". According to linguists, this characteristic is classified in the historical semantic, dealing with the change of meaning through time.

Euphemism is "telling it like it is not" (Evelyne Hatch and Cheryl Brown, 1995: 316). This means that a euphemism is not necessary a synonym of the taboo word that it replaces. It is rather, less emotive and less offensive. Sometimes, the euphemism can be the original taboo word said in a foreign language. Example: the Kabylisians' use of the French word (*préservatif*). Besides, the euphemism can also be expressed in a humoristic way. In both cases, speakers tend to minimise the degree of taboo. Generally, it is expressed through a term denoting either a characteristic of a taboo word, its function or merely its opposite. It is worth mentioning that people believe that a euphemism is used to substitute a shameful word. However, this is not the only reason for the use of a euphemism. Among them, respect when addressing superiors, and diminishing the degree of painful and tragic news (as death and illness).

In the following part, we will present four recapitulating contrastive tables on euphemisms.

PART II:

TABLE OF KABYLE AND ENGLISH EUPHEMISMS

FIELD	KABYLE	ENGLISH
<p>The Human body 1. Sexual organs:</p>	<p>a) - Ayenath (The thing) - Aynat - is (Thing of her/his) - Winna (that thing) - Winnis (his/her thing)</p>	<p>Cunt: - The private parts - Down below - The little thing - The little whole - Wily</p>
<p>2. Breast:</p>	<p>b) - Idmaren (bosom, chest)</p>	<p>- bosom - boobs - chest - bust - lungs - charms</p>
<p>3. Bodily excretions: 3.1 Urine:</p>	<p>- Aman tassa (Water liver) (Water of the liver) - Ibecc imanis (Urinated himself) - ruh at degred aman tassa (go to throw the water of the liver) - iruh adi sirred (he went to urinate) Iffey (he/it went out)</p>	<p>- Wee - wee To urinate:-to spend a penny - to peddle - to pee</p>
<p>3.2 Shirt:</p>	<p>- Ixelas el beylek (The payed a fees) - Imuqranen (the big ones)</p>	<p>- big jobs - Stools To shit:-to spend two pennies</p>

<p>3.3 Diarrhoea:</p>	<p>- tuzel taebutis (run his belly) (he has got the runn)</p>	<p>- geppy tummy - delly belly - trots - having the runs To go to the toilet: - to wash one's hands - to powder one's rose - to make room Constipated: - can't go</p>
<p>3.4 Snot:</p>	<p>- uzlen wanzarnis (run nose his) (his nose run) - vu waxlul (full of snot) (you snotty)</p>	<p>- having a runny nose</p>
<p>3.5 Menstruation:</p>	<p>- et tezel (runs she) (she runs) - uzedig tara (she is not clean)</p>	<p>- having one's period - having the curse - that time of the month</p>
<p>4. Pregnancy:</p>	<p>- Stadist (being pregnant) - Seleguf (with cavity) - tarfed (she is bearing)</p>	<p>- in a family way - expecting - in interesting conditions</p>
<p>5. Virginity:</p>	<p>- tacbeh she is beautiful (virgine) - hader enifim care nose your (take care of your honor) - etbel yeqarsen drum torn (deflowred)</p>	

<p>6. Sexual intercourse:</p>	<p>- etsen aken Slep they together (they slept together)</p>	<p>- sleeping together - going to bed - doing it - the conjugal act</p>
<p>6.1 Pre-marital intercourse: 6.2 Sexual education</p>		<p>- jump to gun - birds and bees - facts of life</p>
<p>7. Places: 7.1 toilet:</p>	<p>- bit elma room water - bit erraha room rest (rest room)</p>	<p>- loo - lavatory - ladies/Gentlemen - little room - rest room</p>
<p>7.2 Brothel:</p>	<p>- akham El Ar -borded</p>	<p>- house off ill repute - red light district</p>
<p>7.3 Prostitution:</p>	<p>- thetcha niffis (He has lost his honour)</p>	<p>- the oldest profession - being on the game - to give French lessons - to give Swedish massage</p>
<p>7.4 Prostitute:</p>	<p>- m'el Ar (woman of easy virtue) -mivarthen (women of streets) - mirgazen (women of men) - timsouaqt (woman trader)</p>	<p>- Woman of easy virtue - lady of the night - working girl - tart - whore - model - pro</p>

Conclusion

Throughout our work, we have tried to tackle in a non exhaustive way the taboo phenomenon, stressing on its origins and domains. We have also noted that the linguistic taboo constitutes a hindrance to the free communication between members of the society. The fact that leads them to use euphemisms.

Finally, we can conclude that an euphemism is a linguistic technique, used to soften language and minimise the degree of its tabooedness. It is also a strategy to facilitate the linguistic speech and achieve a mutual intelligibility. G. Leech considered it as: « the linguistic equivalent of disinfectant » (Leech: 1981: 45).

Moreover, the frequent use of euphemisms can be considered as a step towards the elimination of the taboo word.

At translation level, it is possible to affirm that the equivalence between the two languages is often possible. It is expressed by the same semantic euphemisms as for sexual intercourse, some bodily excretions and toilet, by a French borrowing for (preservative and brothel) and by "case vide" for virginity. The difference is observed in the cultural specificity of each language, for instance, the notion of honor when related to virginity is referred to by the euphemism "nose" in Kabyle and by a vague expression as "in an interesting situation" for a pregnant woman in English besides this, the number of euphemisms for the same taboo varies from one concept to another and from one language to another.

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