

The Influence of Gender Differences in Proscribed Language Use in Taiwan

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of gender differences in the use of proscribed/taboo language in Taiwan. Considerable debate exists over the folk-linguistic perceptions that claim women's language differs markedly in act, frequency, reason and content from that of men's (e.g. de Klerk, 1992, 1997; and Gordon, 1993). A total of 200 respondents (100 Male/100 Female university students) completed a questionnaire designed to check their proscribed / taboo language usage. Significant differences were noted in male and female frequency and use of proscribed/taboo language, and were characterized as follows: (1) perception of a double standard of usage by both males / females; (2) differing expectations regarding the incidence of such language by both males / females; (3) differing reasons attributed for the usage and/or avoidance of such language; and, (4) distinct contrast in the language chosen in bi-/multi-lingual contexts for proscribed/ taboo language by males and females.

Keywords: taboo language, proscribed language, gender differences, folk-linguistics

1. Introduction

The way we speak has changed considerably since the time of our *honorable* ancestors. Chivalry and politesse were expected, once upon a time, whenever we were talking to genteel young ladies or refined young gentlemen. This quaint notion has now given way to an ever present chorus of raucous catcall, endemic public bickering and the proliferation of vile or racist humor all around us. None of these changes have happened overnight, all of these changes are ubiquitous.

News reports currently describe an almost daily parade of pejoratives and invectives, which portend cultural upheaval, if we are not careful. This paradigm shift seems to have taken place in some imaginary "charm school" atmosphere of our imagination. Civil discourse has given way to civil discord so that *bon mots* have been replaced with the usual locker- or barracks-room banter found in an ESPN half-time show or rap serenade.

A variety of studies have been conducted relating to language and gender. Such research has tried to demonstrate that culture is not the only variable to determine a person's choice of language. The given variable of gender difference, being either male or female, seems to have some real bearing on what is and what is not to be said by a speaker. But, how do gender differences affect individual speech acts within a cultural context; say, such as when someone uses proscribed or taboo language? My hypothesis is that gender differences in language (i.e. how and why males and females speak differently from one another) are most evident whenever certain social constraints are placed upon speakers who use proscribed/taboo language. These gender-based language constraints are both perpetual, and observable to even the most casual of researchers, so they will form the basis of this study.

The purpose for this study is to seek possible answers to two basic research questions related to the use of proscribed or taboo language: “Do gender-based differences actually exist in the use of taboo / proscribed language?”, and “What is the source of these perceived differences, if any differences should exist?” Answers to these questions are sought within the context of a contemporary Taiwanese university setting and among the students inhabiting these halls of learning. From an Eastern socio-cultural perspective, the unique position of family-centered traditions, Confucian doctrine (i.e. *institutionalized moral training*), and collective social responsibility all serve to engender a sense of harmony. Traditional constraints (*with language forming a large constituent part*) exist more as truths and are therefore in much greater evidence within this high-context society than in the West. A patriarchal system and the wide-spread use of *primogenitur* still prevail, resulting in a society framework for which women continue to remain as secondary figures; without power, in a “man’s world”. Regular incidence of “woman’s language” in Taiwan has come to mean a lack of the regular imperative, pejorative, or demonstrative aspects that characterize daily “men’s language”. Women are still locked into a traditional notion of feminine decorum.

2. Literature Review

All this may be considered as nothing new, except for the explicitness and audacity of these erstwhile offerings. One earlier text on “proper” swearing technique goes all the way back to 1948. It is by Burges Johnson (*no relation to Sterling*) and it is entitled *The Lost Art of Profanity*. Not surprising for the time, it was written without ever once having mentioned any of the so-called offensive four letter words within its content. McDavid (1986: 398) reported that this author had previously declared (in 1934) American profanity had actually lost its “punch”, so to speak because it was so very commonplace both in public and in the media. Manners, etiquette, and sensitivity all take necessary time, something, which appears too much at premium of late. “Miss Manners” where are you when we need you? Are you skeptical? If so, please read British grammarian Lynne Truss’ 2005 manners tome *Talk to the hand: The utter bloody rudeness of the world today, or six good reasons to stay home and bolt the door* for good measure.

Society periodically attempts to stem the rising tide of profanity in both its written and verbal forms. Such efforts may be organized or individually motivated, such as with the prudish English editor Thomas Bowdler, who said, “By chopping our words, by executing phrases and assassinating expressions, those who would order our society though that they could gain control” (Bragg, 2003: 233). These self-appointed mavens of moderation were a sort of word-police. However, English was to prove far too dangerous and too wild...so, that even Shakespeare was not immune to their proscriptive intervention. Profanity and obscenity are like “beauty” when seen in the eye of the beholder.

Bragg (2003) provided another kind of literary consideration in order to explain exactly how “rough” or “coarse” language went from the common-place vernacular into the taboo, thus proliferating as “weeds in the garden” of words:

An unofficial academy of language was developed through the novel, I believe, which had an effect on styles and speech and writing as great if not greater than that of Swift or Johnson or Sheridan. But even Jane Austen has her limitations. The language of the streets is kept firmly outside the Austen door: the language of bodily parts, was not allowed in the Austen parks; in her own way, Jane Austen was every bit as masterful and controlling as the men who time has seen her surpass. Her own proper and correct use of English has permeated the minds and sensibilities of hundreds of thousands of her readers, a number of whom have carried into their own novels the unspoken but clear and rigid rules of what did and did not do in the expression of behavior. Swear words would never do. No one is called a *son-of-a-bitch*, no one is told to *bugger off*. (p.232)

As Coates and Cameron (1988) said, there has to be some sort of “sociolinguistic explanation” needed to replace the “folk-linguistic” definitions of the past, thus allowing a study of linguistic variations such as gender difference. Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams (2003: 476) asked, “How can language be filthy? In fact, how can it be clean? The filth or beauty of a language must be in the ear of the listener, or in the collective ear of the society.” Rhetorically, she responded with a quote from the travel novelist Paul Theroux, “A foreign swear-word is practically inoffensive except to the person who has learned it early in life and knows its social limits.” Therefore, forbidden acts or words that are used, culturally speaking, reflect upon and possibly even evoke the particular customs and views of that society. If not, they will remain moot and possibly even disappear.

According to Wardhaugh (2003: 318), “Different languages do seem to prescribe different forms for use by men and women.” Contemporary usage of proscribed/taboo language by Taiwanese young adults (20-28 years of age) will prove a case in point. Taiwanese/Chinese/Asian culture is central to the shaping of a generalized regard for both the use of male taboo language and the relative prohibition of taboo language use by females. It is hoped that the hypothesis of this study may be proven or disproved through consideration of a single questionnaire within this cultural context.

4. Methodology

4.1 Background information on the participants

This study included the administration of a questionnaire (N = 200) was administered at the same southern Taiwanese university. All participants were full-time, sophomore- or junior-level students in either a general education or an ESL/EFL study program. Participants were 18-28 years of age, unmarried, without children, and 100 male and 100 female in number (N=200). All data were gathered according to the ethical framework of criteria, including informed participant consent, guaranteed anonymity, and confidentiality of response made apparent before administration. Respondents were asked to fill in a 10-item questionnaire on taboo and proscribed language within a regular classroom setting and then return the completed questionnaire to this researcher.

4.2 Instruments and materials

4.2.1 Questionnaires

All questionnaires were administered in the Mandarin Chinese language (*Putonghua*), the participants’ L1, in an effort to preclude any misunderstanding of the terminology used in, or to inhibit the participants’ effective administration of, the questionnaire. Translation of the questionnaire instrument was considered to be done on a professional level, by a licensed translator – *English to Chinese*. All questionnaires were completed and then returned within the same two-day period. The questionnaire consisted of a sequence of ten items related to the respondents’ personal usage and opinions related to their proscribed and or taboo language use. Question items were asked in such a way as to determine respondents’ identification of related variables or the respondents’ individual reasons for using or avoiding taboo language.

5. Results and discussions

The questionnaire was comprised of 10 questions and aimed to explore participant perceptions of how taboo and proscribed language was influenced by the respondents’ gender. Questionnaire results indicated as follows.

1. *Do you believe that there is a double standard exists which assumes that men may use proscribed language, while women are restricted from doing so?*
For this item, 73% of men and 86% of women believed that a notable double standard exists which assumes that taboo language is for the exclusive use of men and that women who use taboo language are to be criticized in some form or fashion. The remaining 27% of men and 14% of women believe that a notable double standard does not exist regarding the same assumption.
2. *Do you think that it’s equally appropriate for men / women to use taboo language?*
For this item, 56% of men and 52% of women believe that taboo language is as *equally appropriate* for women to say, as it is for men to say. Another 9% of male and 15% of female respondents think it is acceptable for both males and females to use prohibited language in mixed company (*i.e. male and female together*), and 1% of the male and 2% of the females think it is acceptable for female friends to use such language in female exclusive company. An equal number of 19% of male and female respondents each think it is *never acceptable* to use proscribed or taboo language. The remaining 18% of males and 12% of females said it was *acceptable anytime*.
3. *Do you believe that swearing (i.e. use of proscribed language) is a matter of etiquette rather than morality?*
For this item, 66% of male and 85% of female respondents believed that swearing was a matter of *etiquette* rather than a matter of *morality* regarding the use or prohibition of this form of language. 13% of male and 8% of female respondents thought *morality* was the issue rather than a matter of *etiquette*. 21% of males and 7% of females said they were *undecided / did not know* as to their response.

4. *How frequently do you use taboo language in your own speech?*
For this item, 75% of male subjects reported *occasional* use of taboo language with a degree of regularity, 17% of male respondents rated themselves as frequent regular users (*always*) of taboo language, while 2% reported that they *never* use profanity or taboo words. Almost all of the female subjects reported use (82%) of taboo language with an *occasional* regularity. 3% of female respondents rated themselves as frequent users (*always*) of taboo language, while 15% of female respondents reported *never* using profanity or taboo words.
5. *Is it ever acceptable for females to use taboo language in a public setting?*
For this item, 72% of males and 57% of females thought it was *sometimes* acceptable to use taboo language in a public setting, 16% of males and 36% of females thought it was *never* acceptable, and 12% of males and 7% of females thought it was *always* acceptable to use taboo language in public settings.
6. *Where do you expect to hear taboo language most often?*
For this item, 3% of males expected their home to be the place where they *most* expect to hear taboo language, while 11% of females report the same setting. 69% of male respondents reported the use of taboo language *with their male friends* as the setting in which they most expected to hear taboo language. This compared with the 27% female respondents who most expect to hear taboo language when they are *with their female friends*. 1% of males and 6% of females expect the *classroom* to be the place where they hear bad language. 6% of males most expect to hear taboo language when they are in mixed (*male/female*) company, while 27% of females most expect to hear taboo language in a similar setting. No male respondents expected to most likely hear taboo language as primary source in the *media*, from *female friends* or at *work*. This contrasted directly with the 4% of female respondents who expect to most probably hear taboo language in the *media*, 4% with *female friends*, and 1% *at work*. 21% of males and 23% of females reported that they primarily expected taboo language *anywhere/anytime*
7. *Why do you use taboo language?*
For this item, 7% of male respondents and 4% of female respondents reported *humor* for the purpose of using taboo language, 6% of males and 3% of females used taboo language for purposes of *emphasis*. 35% of the male and 64% of the female respondents reported *venting emotion* as their only reason for using taboo language. 13% of males and 3% females said taboo was used out of personal *habit*. 26% of males and 12% of females thought taboo language use was *normal* to use. 7% of males and 3% of females reported using proscribed language for purpose of achieving *intimacy with others*. 2% of males said using taboo language was *part of their personality*, so that's why they used it. No female gave this form of response. 1% of males gave *fear/vulnerability* as their reason for taboo language use. Again no female replied in this manner. No male and 1% of the female respondents used taboo language for *shock* purposes. 3% of males and 10% of females gave an unspecified *other* reason response to this question.
8. *Do you find taboo language sexist or offensive in nature when you encounter it?*
3% of males and a like number of 3% of females found taboo language use to be *sexist or offensive* in nature. 55% of male and 36% of female respondents reported that giving a *negative impression* was their primary motivation to avoid using proscribed or taboo language. Conversely, 22% of males reported that the *inappropriateness* of proscribed or taboo language was their primary motive for avoiding the use of taboo language versus 40% of the female respondents. An equal number of 1% of both male and female respondents thought that being perceived to have a *limited vocabulary* was the primary reason to avoid profanity. 2% of male and 12% of female respondents reported their being *uncomfortable* with taboo language usage. 5% of males and 6% of females used *parental influence* as the primary reason for avoiding taboo language. 4% of the males thought such language was to be avoided because it was not *gentlemanly*, while 1% of female respondents avoided such usage because of its perception as *unfeminine*. 2% of males and no females gave *religious influence* as a primary reason to avoid taboo language. 6% of males and no (0%) females provided *other* unspecified reasons to avoid profanity and taboo language.
9. *Do you choose to use euphemisms to replace your own taboo language?*
Both genders reported a high usage rate of *euphemistic usage* that was used to replace proscribed or taboo language. 84% of males and 91% of females used this form. 16% of males and 9% of females reported *not* using euphemisms in their speech.

10. *What language do you use when you choose to speak taboo language?*

Finally, 2% of males and 7% of females reported *never* using taboo language of any kind. 10% of male respondents reported using *Chinese*, 35% reported using *Taiwanese*, while 2% used *another language*. No males or females reported using *aboriginal dialects*, *Cantonese*, or *other languages* except for 1% of males reported who reported using *Hakkanese* for the speaking of taboo language. The remaining 41% of males reported using a *mixture of two or more languages* for speaking taboo language. This compares to percentages reported by the female respondents: 7% reported *never* using taboo language, 43% reported using *Chinese*, 15% reported using *Taiwanese*, 4% reported using *English*, and 31% used a *mixture of two or more languages* for taboo language purposes.

Just one of these many findings seems to support the idea that males use taboo language more than females, so it may be inferred that there is a gender-based difference existing in the use of taboo language by young Taiwanese adults in southern Taiwan. Other findings will now be discussed in support of the primary finding as stated above.

This study sought to provide evidence needed to either support or disprove a given hypothesis, one that considers gender differenced to affect the use of proscribed or taboo language in speakers. In addition, some form of direct/indirect attribution was attempted to be made regarding how and why speakers might wish to use or avoid such language. Finally, this study aimed to provide sufficient evidence of the significant differences in cross-gendered speech as they might be illustrated within the broader cultural context of Taiwan.

The hypothesis proposed in this study is that gender differences will or will not affect the use of proscribed or taboo language by a speaker. Although numerous studies exist in this area of research, there seems to be a lack of research literature as it pertains to Asian students with a common Confucian philosophical heritage. The overall consideration of such a societal influence providing yet another layer of behavior in the choice of language acts is compelling. The idea of a “collective” face provides a framework for the use of proscribed language in which taboo serves to control individuals through a prolonged or engendered sense of *shame* or *ridicule*. A structural framework for this study’s research was developed in consideration of three dimensions: first, a general definition of what taboo/proscribed language use; second, a specific definition of what taboo/proscribed language use may be regarding gender differences; and third, an overall definition of what taboo/proscribed language use may be regarding gender differences within a Taiwanese (*Asian/Chinese*) cultural setting.

The focus instrument of this study was a basic questionnaire. It was administered to provide qualitative data to be discussed. The balance of this writing shall consist of a discussion of each of the ten items taken from the actual questionnaire. They will be discussed in terms of subjective (both *contrastive* and *comparative*) implications and inferences that may yet be drawn; however, objective statistical analysis shall take place only after this paper’s submission for purposes of class assignment / grading assessment. At present, as in Salami and Awolowo (2006), it is not quite clear what factor(s) are actually responsible for resulting in female students reporting less use of taboo language or why male students may prefer such usage in greater numbers.

6. *Conclusion*

As any foreign language teacher would love to tell you, most young students have a natural propensity for wanting to learn the so-called “dirty” words in their target language first thing. While such a notion is extremely hard to prove, it is much easier to observe that the teaching of proscribed and taboo language does not work in the same order. Teachers naturally avoid any taboo subjects and foul language for any variety of logical reasons and personal choices.

While conducting the literature review for this study, I was able to find only one contemporary academic textbook entitled *Taboos and Issues*, (2002) by Richard MacAndrew and Ron Martínez that specifically addressed the teaching of cultural taboos and controversial issues in the ESL/EFL classroom. Three broad categories were addressed within the context of this book: taboos such as *swearing*, talking about *death*, and *prostitution*; serious issues such as *racism* and *genetic engineering*; and, personal matters such as *appearance*, *hygiene* and *nudity*. Numerous disclaimers are stated continually throughout the book’s introduction in order to insure that the controversial nature and offensive language presented in this text are taken at face-value and not meant to shock or intentionally offend, insult, or injure the potential reader/student/teacher. The book is meant to supplement language texts in terms of both discussion and cultural awareness of taboo topics/controversial issues.

The pedagogical implications of this study are such that proscribed language and taboo subjects should be taught within the classroom setting in order to provide a student with the means to *avoid offense* rather than *give offense* through some ignorance of either direct language or implied meaning. Proscribed language and taboo subjects are a matter of fact in the news, in the street, and in the daily interaction of innumerable people. The open use of this form of language may constitute a physical danger to any unwary user, giving offense and therefore provocation for some form of violence, redress, or intimidation of the student.

Teachers must realize that it is a responsibility to teach what is necessary and justifiable in the classroom. Whether it is reasonable or acceptable is fully another question, one of social acceptability more often than not. Swann (1992) introduces her book *Girls, Boys and Language* with this thought, “Children need to make sense of diversity and contradiction, and diversity and contradiction can be exploited by those who wish to promote change –widening opportunities to both girls and boys” (p.11).

Although this paper demonstrated that gender differences in language use seems to exist among Taiwanese young adults, the behavior and attitudes of both male and female users of proscribed language should require some explanation beyond the notion of gender. Future study of how gender differences affect the use of proscribed and taboo language should consider the following associative constraints: the effect of religious beliefs (Confucian/Daoist/Buddhist), an urban/rural social orientation of the respondent, and the socio-economic status of the given respondent. Research appears to indicate that participants from an Asian cultural environment may be motivated to use or prohibit offensive language for reasons inherently based within that culture.

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