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How Far do Students Acknowledge the Meaning of Taboo Words?!

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Abstract. The given work is a short review of a very essential and important aspect of language – Taboo language. The article is provided with a brief, but quite interesting questionnaire, which was carried out on the English language students (80 students entirely). The results of the questionnaire appeared to be very intriguing and surprising. It proved that students really need more adequate knowledge about the taboo language, its real meaning and importance in communication.

Keywords: taboo; cultural background; inoffensive; mildly offensive and very offensive words; context.

Introduction

What is taboo? How do people understand its meaning and react to it? There are different assumptions about this term in various scientific works. According to Steiner taboo is: “any prohibitions which carry no penalties beyond the anxiety and embarrassment arising from a breach of strongly entrenched customs.” (1967: 143).

The encyclopedia of social sciences (1937) defines taboos as “a negative sanction whose infringement results in an automatic penalty without human or superhuman mediation.” And also, “A word that many people consider offensive or shocking, for example because it refers to sex, the body or people’s race.” (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary. 2005).

A taboo is a “ban or inhibition resulting from social custom or aversion” (The American Heritage dictionary of the English Language, 2000). The term taboo relates both to taboo word (e.g. fuck, cunt) and taboo topics (e.g. abortion and death). Taboos differ according to cultural background; something that is acceptable for one culture is unacceptable for another one.

The role of taboo

In real life, native speakers don’t only use the Standard English but quite often they speak slang, taboo words or swear words. When they shout at you with taboo words, do you know what do they want or what does it mean if you don’t know the meaning of taboo word? The reason that

taboo words should be understood parallel with Standard English is to aware people when they are threatened or insulted

As Keith Allan and Kate Burridge say: understanding taboos “is not a triumph of the offensive over the inoffensive, of dysphemism over euphemism, of impoliteness over politeness; in fact the tabooed, the offensive, the dysphemistic and the impolite only seem more powerful forces because each of them identifies the marked behavior. By default we are polite, euphemistic, orthophemistic and inoffensive; and we censor our language use to eschew tabooed topics in pursuit of well-being for ourselves and for others.”(2006, p.2)

Some scientists use the terms taboo words or swear bad words or bad language interchangeably to describe the lexicon of offensive language. We can also meet such kind of words as “clean” “dirty” “formal” “informal” words. They range from inoffensive, mildly offensive or to the very offensive. Let’s see the following example. In English we have such kind of words: buttocks, behind and arse. All of them are used for the same part of the body. Buttock is a “clean” word used in formal situations, behind is a “cleaner” word used in general conversations. On the other hand, the arse is a “dirty” taboo word used in very informal situations and shouldn’t be used in writing, at school, at work and any social places.

We shouldn’t forget that context also plays an important role while understanding taboos. For example: Dick is a shortened name of Richard, dick is also a common name for penis. Dick the name is not taboo, but dick the penis is.

Research

The present study examined whether the students had a general knowledge about taboo words, taboo expressions; if they knew its meaning, usage, how much do they understand English taboos and how frequently they used them.

80 students from our university participated in the study. They fill the questionnaire voluntarily. The students were from all courses, (20 students from the first course, 20 from the second, 20 from the third and 20 from the fourth course)

Participants were asked to answer the following questions:

1. What are taboo words? Please circle one of the variants below.

Formal words, Words used in everyday life, Inappropriate, offensive words, Literal words

2. How often do you hear taboo words in your surrounding?

Very often, often, not often, never

3. Do you use taboo words in your language? Why/ why not?

Often, sometimes, rarely, never

4. When and why do you think some people use taboo words a lot?

5. Do you know any taboo words in the English language, if so, can you write them down?

6. How useful is it for you to know taboo words in English?

Very useful, useful, quite useful, not useful

7. Why do students often find it easy to remember taboo words in English?

For interest, for pleasure, for fun, for new vocabulary

8. Do you think learning taboo words is a waste of time?

Yes, no

9. Do you think teachers should teach taboo words to students or not? Why?

10. Match the following taboo words with their literal meaning below.

Hell, piss, crap, balls, bloody, bollocks, bastards, shit, prick, bugger, fuck, cunt

1. Testicles

2. Testicles

3. To have sexual intercourse

4. (religious) the opposite of paradise

5. To urinate

6. To defecate, excrement

7. To defecate, excrement

8. A woman’s sexual organ (vagina)

9. A man’s sexual organ (penis)

10. To have anal intercourse, a person who has anal intercourse

11. A child whose parents are not married

12. No real meaning (used for emphasis)

The results of questionnaire:

Now we can see the questionnaire with answers and percentages. It must be said, that the results were quite interesting and somehow surprising, especially when we students get frustrated while answering questions; they could hardly find the exact meaning of taboo words and later find the matches of literal words with the bad words.

1. What are taboo words? Please circle one of the variants below. Formal words – 9 %. Words used in everyday life – 40 %, Inappropriate, offensive words – 51 %. Literal words – 0 %

2. How often do you hear taboo words in your surrounding?

Very often – 15 %, often – 24 %, not often – 41 %, never – 0 %

3. Do you use taboo words in your language? Why/ why not?

Often – 4 %, sometimes - 38, rarely – 23, never – 15 %,

4. When and why do you think some people use taboo words a lot? (Students' answers varied).

When they are angry or happy; in the street; because taboo words help to get released from negative energy; to make some impression, when they are sad; Because it's their habit, for fun, to look cool, for new vocabulary

5. Do you know any taboo words in the English language, if so, can you write them down?

Fuck, shit, impotent, bastard, bitch, piss

6. How useful is it for you to know taboo words in English?

Very useful – 9 %, useful – 22 %, quite useful – 17 %, not useful – 22 %

7. Why do students often find it easy to remember taboo words in English? For interest – 27 %, for pleasure – 4 %, for fun – 27 %, for new vocabulary – 12 %

8. Do you think learning taboo words is a waste of time?

Yes – 26 %, no – 44 %,

9. Do you think teachers should teach taboo words to students or not? Why? Yes – 31 %, no – 27 %, no comment – 12 %

10. Match the following taboo words with their literal meaning below.

Hell, piss, crap, balls, bloody, bollocks, bastards, shit, prick, bugger, fuck, cunt

1. Testicles - 1 % (of the students could find the matching to this)

2. Testicles - 1 %

3. To have sexual intercourse - 14 %

4. (religious) the opposite of paradise – 25 %

5. To urinate - 2 %

6. To defecate, excrement – 1 %

7. To defecate, excrement - 0 %

8. A woman's sexual organ(vagina) - 2 %

9. A man's sexual organ (penis) - 3 %

10. To have anal intercourse, a person who has anal intercourse – 2 %

11. A child whose parents are not married - 18 %

12. No real meaning (used for emphasis) – 0 %

The given questionnaire about the taboo-topic seemed to be quite new for them; most of them had almost no experience in this area. Notwithstanding the fact that our generation spends too much time on watching foreign film and programs, taboo words appeared to be quite unfamiliar for them. As the results and percentages show only few taboo words are known for them. But at the end of the questionnaire almost all of them showed great desire to find out and learn more. They were asking to tell them the definitions of tabooed words.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the role of taboo language is inevitable. There is much to say about taboo words, it's a huge subject with its categories and subcategories, but it's impossible to cover everything in one work. Working on taboo words brings a real desire to find out more about this topic, as it reveals a lot about the language, its people and cultural peculiarities and characteristics.

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