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A Descriptive Analysis of Diminishing Linguistic Taboos in Pakistan

Muhammad Kamal Khan and Azhar Parvaiz

Abstract

Linguistic taboos are the interesting ways of the reflection of social norms and cultural values of a society within its language. The present study analyzes the changing nature of the linguistic taboos of Pakistani society and explores the approaches of the members of society towards these taboos.

Fourteen linguistic taboos were selected for this research and were investigated through data collected from 80 participants of two different age-groups.

The findings based on the blend of qualitative and quantitative data reveal marked differences in the approach of both groups towards these linguistic taboos.

The group of younger generation was found less afraid of the violation of their linguistic taboos showing a clear-cut change in the nature of these linguistic taboos.

The findings were further discussed to assess the claim of the researchers of the present study about the diminishing nature of linguistic taboos and some points for the preservation of these cultural and linguistic values were suggested.

Introduction

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A Descriptive Analysis of Diminishing Linguistic Taboos in Pakistan

At a time when almost all types of taboos are in the process of change in Pakistan, it is very much relevant to re-examine the nature of such taboos, especially the linguistic ones, their origin, and their social and psychological meanings.

Linguistic taboos exist in almost every culture but the approaches of members towards them vary from culture to culture. Haller (1976: 25) states,

Among primitive peoples many words were the exclusive property of the priests or the elders, unpronounceable sometimes even by them, and spoken by outsiders under pain of death.

He further maintained that while in the pre-modern era, before the invention of technological instruments like telephone, radio, and television began to break down linguistic barriers, it was axiomatic that in any long-settled country each social level was certain to develop a way of speaking peculiar to itself. The result of such an attitude was that status dialects as well as geographical dialects came into existence with predictable regularity.

Ultimately the courtly speech inevitably gained in prestige at the expense of all other ways of speaking and often acquired the ambivalence of a taboo object-outsiders simultaneously admiring it and fearing to trespass on it. Such an interesting phenomenon exists almost everywhere in the languages of the world communities.

Taboo is a very strange phenomenon, and the approaches of different groups are sometimes contrary to each other. A taboo which is considered severe by a group of people may be mild for other.

The present study tries to provide a relatively straightforward framework for analyzing the changing nature of linguistic taboos. Taboos are separated on the basis of the laws behind them. People have different approaches towards linguistic taboos on the basis of their source. This study aims to explore the nature of diminishing linguistic taboos in Pakistani society.

Taboos - Three Major Kinds in Pakistani Society

A taboo is a strong social prohibition (or ban) against words, objects, actions, discussions or people that are considered undesirable or offensive by a group, culture or society. Branding the taboo is usually considered objectionable or abhorrent. Some taboo activities or customs are prohibited under law and transgressions may lead to severe penalties. Other taboos result in embarrassment, shame and rudeness. Linguistic taboos can be severe, moderate or mild.

There are three major kinds of taboos in Pakistani society. Linguistic taboos, food, and modesty taboos. Language taboos are the prohibitions which forbid misuse of certain sacred or obscene words like discussion or depiction of sex and many others.

Linguistic Taboos

Linguistic taboo or the fact of avoiding mentioning certain words and expressions in a language is a common practice in more than one society. Its history is as old as the history of language itself. The nature of these words might be shocking in character or associated with lack of decency and morality and in order not to hurt the other members of the society, many a term is never used in the lives of some individuals although they know them perfectly.

In societies like Pashto, taboos are related to the strict social code of conduct for the society, i.e., Pakhtunwali (Kamal, 2008). But, taboo language is not only associated with lack of decency, very often it is just a matter of convention where the normal use of an item in a language is inhibited due to particular social values and beliefs (Trudgill 1986: 29).

According to psychologist Sigmund Freud, taboos and totems of a society may not have any rational justification (1983). The tabooed items vary from one society to another. According to Trudgill, the strongest taboo-words in the English-speaking world are still associated with sex, followed by those associated with excretion. In Norway, they are mostly expressions connected with the devil, and in Roman Catholic culture, they are words essentially associated with religion (Mawaja Mbaya 2002: 224).

Nature of Taboos

Mostly there are two types of laws behind the linguistic taboos of a society; custom and religious laws. Custom-laws are the rules of action which are actually observed by the people of a society. It is the expression of actual uniformity of some voluntary action. Customary law is an important source of law. This is particularly so among the conservative people who want to keep as much to the past as possible (Mahajan 1966: 70). Custom is to society what law is to state. Each is the expression and realization, to the measure of men's insight and ability, of the principles of right and justice. Importance of customary law continuously diminishes as the legal system grows (Salmond 1966: 191).

Religious-laws also play very important role in the observation of linguistic taboos. These laws are usually preached by clergymen and most of these laws are part of the law of Muslim societies. People abide by such laws and society patronizes institutions for the purpose. In modern societies, importance is given to religious freedom. Many linguistic taboos are based on religious laws.

Aim of the Study

The study aims to explore the changing trends of linguistic taboos in Pakistani society. For the purpose, we have the following three-fold aim for the study involved:

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Firstly, we have analyzed the approach of the people of two different age-groups in Pakistan towards their linguistic taboos. Secondly, we have tried to give some description of the nature of linguistic taboos, i.e., why some taboos are more changing in nature. Finally, we have also suggested some points for the preservation and maintenance of our linguistic taboos. Specifically the research study involved these two questions:

- Whether or not there is any difference between the two age-groups regarding their linguistic taboos?
- Why some taboos are diminishing more than others?

Background to the Study

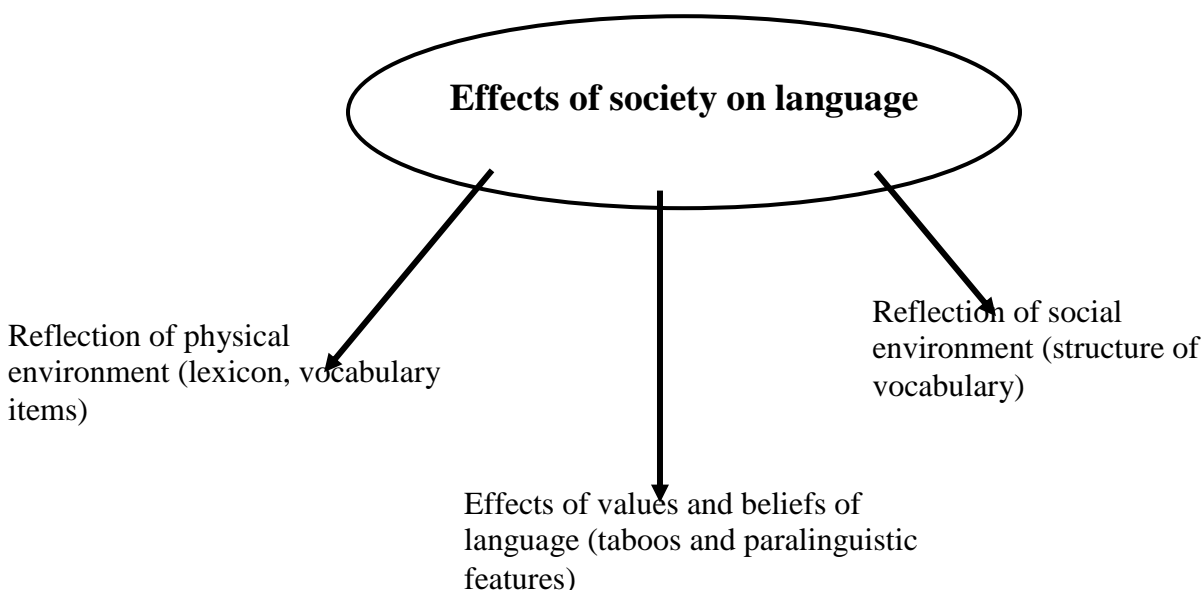
For Bernstein, as for Halliday, it is the mode of socialization that mediates the formation of the linguistic code from the social semiotic (Bernstein, 1971). The idea that worldviews are encoded in language has long played a role in sociolinguistics. First advanced by Wilhelm Von Humboldt, in the early nineteenth century, it came to be associated in the twentieth century with the work of Edward Sapir and Benjamin L. Whorf. Languages, they concluded from their observations, function as perceptual and conceptual filters, a notion which subsequently became known as “linguistic relativity hypothesis” (Coulmas: 1997: 580).

According to McGee (1960: 489), “Language is after all an iceberg: most of its bulk is below the surface. What is genetically and causally fundamental to language are patterns of classificatory and linguistic habits and skills more or less shared by the members of a linguistic community”. Language is the part of the part of every social activity. It is formed, learned and practiced in a physical and social context; insofar as the physical-social context of learning is similar for different members of a community, similar disposition will allow easy communication and mutual understanding of the language among its speakers.

Folkways and mores of a society play important role in establishing the good and bad things of a society. Shaking hands, preference to eat squatting on the ground, wearing colorful dresses on some occasions like Eid, driving on left-hand on the road, traditional hospitality, helping the poor or needy, offering condolences and eating ‘parathas’ with tea for breakfast are a few of typical Pakistani folkways (Kamal, 2008).

Modern societies have thousands of folkways. Some folkways are important and others are not. Although sorting out these folkways is a very difficult task because the nature of most of these folkways is changing. On the basis of folkways, “mores” of a society are decided. These mores may include food taboos which make cattle, hogs, or horses unfit to eat; modesty taboos which forbid exposure of the face, the ankle, the wrist, the breast, or whatever is “immodest”; language taboos which forbid misuse of certain sacred or obscene words; and many others (Horton and Hunt, 1984).

It is widely accepted that linguistic taboos are the effects of beliefs and values of a society on its language. The most prominent work that we have come across in this regard is that of Trudgill. He says that it is the society which affects language and its environment is reflected in language. The physical environment (normally in the structure of its lexicon) as well as the social environment (structure of the vocabulary), he observes, are reflected in its language. In addition, the beliefs and values of a society can also have an effect on its language (see Figure 1). According to Trudgill (1987) “the most interesting way in which society affects its language is through the phenomenon known as “taboo”.



(Figure 1: The effects of Society on Language)

Change is continuous in human affairs and, therefore, society is always prone to change with the passage of time. Social values and beliefs also keep changing. These changing factors are of different types, like population change, change in collective behavior and social movements, and cultural change. “Social change is very closely related to social values” (Iqbal 1984: 342). There are some change theories given by sociologists. For example Ibn-e-Khaldun (1332-1406) developed his cyclic theory of social change according to which every human society faces cyclic change after 120 years in three stages namely growth, development and decay, of forty years each (Iqbal 1984: 350).

The response of language to social change is closely related to the development because language is a social product and every society constitutes itself through language. It was Ferdinand de Saussure (1916), the pioneer of structural linguistics as an autonomous science,

who called language a social fact. Some cultural concepts, including some of our most important abstract concepts are learned through language, so language is an important instrument of socialization.

But, a question that arises here is that how much change in language is prone to be there with this social change? “Linguistic changes follow social changes very readily, but it is not always a simple matter to make them precede social change” (Trudgill: 1987: 99). Social change may be the result of the sharp media of the global world and there could be any other reason as well. But local languages are undoubtedly under challenge and there is a timely need to focus on the preservation of the social norms and values of the local cultures.

Methodology

Data were collected from two distinct groups of 80 married participants. 40 from fifty to sixty years of age in group-A (older group): and 40 from twenty to thirty years in group-B (younger group). The native language of both groups was any of the three major languages of Pakistan (Punjabi, Urdu or Pashto).

The basic instrument for the current study was a questionnaire which was developed for the participants with close-ended questions, in the form of ‘yes’ or ‘no’.

14 common linguistic taboos from Pakistani society were selected to see the approach of the people towards these taboos on the basis of the nature or source of them. Some of these taboos were diminishing while the others were static to some extent.

The following linguistic taboos were selected for the questionnaire;

- 1 Calling spouse by name.
- 2 Uttering the names of parents.
- 3 Talking to fiancé and fiancée before marriage.
- 4 Discussing with father about matrimonial plans.
- 5 Discussion about non-ritually slaughtered animals.
- 6 Discussing with opposite sex in a mix social gathering (male, female) where most of the participants are strangers.
- 7 Watching movies along with elders, especially with opposite sex.
- 8 Talking to spouse, for newly married couple, in the presence of elders.
- 9 Exchanging greetings and shaking hands with opposite sex in social gatherings.
- 10 Using words like *yaar* (deeply intimate friend) for showing intimacy, especially with opposite sex.
- 11 To use slang language in the presence of elders.
- 12 To use high pitch /high tone words in the presence of elders.
- 13 Calling teachers by name.
- 14 Talks about wearing shorts in the presence of elders.

These taboos were taken from the major category of linguistic taboos. Taboos related to calling the spouse (1), uttering parents' name (2), discussing matrimonial matters with father (4), talk between newly married couple in the presence of the parents (8), using intimate words like *yaar* for either sex (10), using slang words in the presence of elders (11) and using high tone words (12) are purely linguistic taboos whereas the rest of the taboos were related to linguistic category one way or the other.

The percentages of the participants were calculated and were shown in figures. These calculations were also taken into account for analyzing their results. Both the groups were compared through a statistical test; General Linear Model of SPSS Statistical Package for Social Sciences) was applied to test the data quantitatively. Their means were taken and significance ratio was analyzed. Finally the F value of groups was also compared.

Non-random linguistic taboos were selected which were common in Pakistani society as observed by the majority of the people.

Married population was taken because they were considered mature speakers and many of under-study taboos were related to married life.

Results and Discussions

To find out whether or not there is any difference between both groups regarding the negation of all questions, we compare both groups in Figure 2 below.

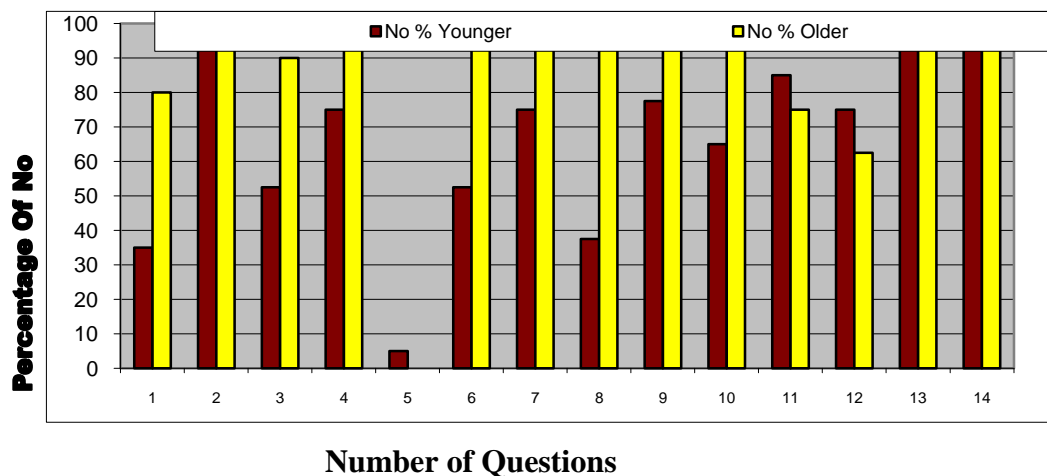


Figure 2 Overall view of data in terms of 'No' to the questions

Figure 2 shows that there is difference between both the groups. The first question, naming the spouse, which is a linguistic taboo is negated by 80 % by older group while 35 % by younger group which means that this taboo is diminishing. The older group, most of the time, used to call their spouse by adding father/mother to the name of the kid or in third person. Previously it was a strict taboo but over the years of time, its intensity is decreased and as the Figure 2 shows it may be predicted that this taboo will be diminished after another generation.

In Figure 3 we have put the data to see whether or not there is a difference between both the groups in the form of yes.

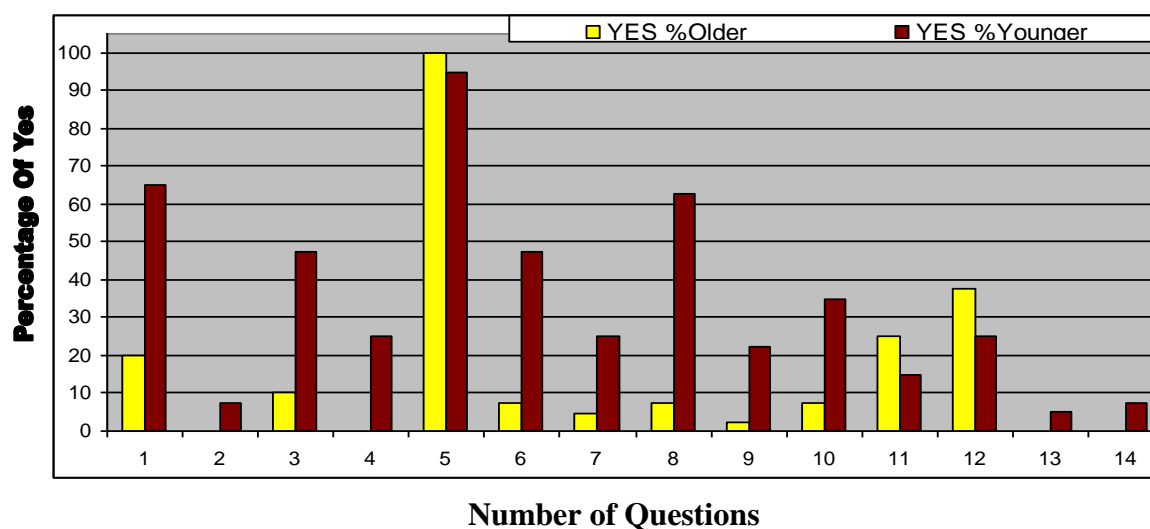


Figure 3 Overall view of data in terms of ‘Yes’ to the questions

The results show that 65 % of the younger group calls their spouse by name (Figure 3). The second question, uttering the names of the parents is also a linguistic taboo which is based on the religious teaching. That is why 100 % respondents belonging to group (1) and 95 % respondents belonging to group (2) responded against uttering the names of their parents.

The third question was related to talks between fiancé and fiancée. It is a linguistic taboo based on the custom laws. Great difference between the younger generation and older generation was evident. 92.5 % Respondents from the group A did not like to talk to their fiancé/fiancée prior to their marriage whereas 47.5 % of the group B had no harm in talking to their fiancé or fiancée.

About Question No.4, results show that 100% respondents from group A negated that they had never discussed their matrimonial plans with their fathers. Results reveal that 100 % of group A and 95 % of group B were careful about their discussion of meat which should be ritually slaughtered. It was a taboo based on religious laws.

Responses to Question No.6 show that 95 % of group A and 52.5 % of group B think that they should not discuss with opposite sex in a social gathering where most of the participants are strangers.

According to results, 100 % of group A and 75 % of group B were against discussing and watching movies with their elders. 92.5 % of group A and 37.5 % of group B said that they did not talk to their spouses when they were newly married. There is a huge difference between the views of both groups. 62.5 % of younger group did not observe this taboo.

The results of Question No.9 reveal that 100 % of group A and 77.5 % of group B were observing the taboo of exchanging greetings and shaking hands with opposite sex in a social gathering. Similarly 92.5 % group A and 65 % of group B observed the taboo against using word *yaar* for opposite sex.

The results of Figure 3 give the evidence that only 15 % of group B and 25 % of group A were using slang words in the presence of elders. More than half, i.e. 62.5 % of the older group and 75 % of the younger group said that they did not use high pitch / high tone words in the presence of elders.

Figure 2 show that 100 % of older group and 97.5 % of younger group were observing the taboo against calling teacher by name. They said that they cannot even think of violating this taboo which is based on religious teaching. Similarly 100 % of group A and 95 % of group B never talked about wearing shorts in the presence of their elders.

Table 1 Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	Custom	101.250(a)	1	101.250	63.921	.000
	Religion	2.113(b)	1	2.113	1.428	.236

In order to know whether there is a difference between the taboos based on custom laws and taboos based on religious laws, the data were further analyzed into SPSS (Statistical package for social sciences) and general linear model was applied to test the data quantitatively. The test shows that there is a difference between custom laws and religious laws. The 'F' value at the customary law is 63.921 which is very significant compared to 1.428 at religious laws.

Conclusion

Language is a very important part of a society. Among other things, it carries the important cultural knowledge of a society. The most significant reflection of cultural values is revealed in the shape of linguistic taboos of a society.

Our study shows that almost all types of our linguistic taboos are changing. Linguistic taboos based on custom laws are rapidly changing while taboos based on religious-laws are also changing at a comparatively low speed. Most of the participants belonging to the older group endorsed the taboos based on religious laws. They still considered them strict taboos. However, the younger group showed a different attitude towards their linguistic taboos, especially the taboos based on the custom laws. As the society moves ahead, rapid changes are bound to occur due to globalization, media onslaught, code shifting and code mixing, and linguistic imperialism. These factors tend to eliminate or reduce the sense of cultural values of our younger generation.

There was a marked difference in the attitude of both groups. This shows that there was a clear-cut difference between them. The younger generation was less frightened by their linguistic taboos. Even the linguistic taboos based on religious laws in Pakistan are changing gradually.

We may conclude that taboos based on customary laws are more diminishing in nature and are more prone to change in comparison with taboos based on religious laws. This attitude is the reflection of the changing linguistic behaviour of the people.

In such a scenario, we suggest the preservation of our cultural and linguistic values. We also suggest that the factors responsible for this change should be analyzed and counteracted. Some of the important steps that can be taken are the following:

1. Parents should properly encourage their children to speak their indigenous languages along with their international languages.
2. The language of children should be properly observed against the use of filthy language at schools and seminaries.
3. Teacher and parents should form social organizations in order to morally train their kids and give them awareness about their own cultural and linguistic values.
4. Government should also take proper steps to ensure training teachers with skills that will help students to retain cultural values even as the students are encouraged to retain their native languages for all purposes of communication.
5. Great coordination among all the stakeholders is required to save our prestigious social values from deterioration.
6. Students must learn international languages but not at the price of their own. They must also take care of their native cultures and languages.

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