

Use and Attitude towards English Taboo Words Among Young Adults in a Nigerian University

L. Oladipo Salami and Obafemi Awolowo
University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria

Abstract

In Nigeria, where English is spoken as a second language, the spread of western culture alongside the English language has brought in its wake an ostensibly liberal attitude to the use of taboo words of English origin. This paper describes and analyses self-reports on the use and attitude towards six selected English taboo words (including what are referred to as four letter, swear, vulgar and obscene words) among undergraduates of a Nigerian university. It focuses specifically on the differential use and attitudes towards these English words according to the variables of gender and religious inclination. The study concludes that while the gender of a speaker is important in the use and attitudes to English taboo words, religion has no significant contribution to make.

Culture, taboo and gender differences

Taboo is one aspect of social structure that is reflected both in language and action. It can be characterized as being concerned with some behaviour that is forbidden, or regarded as immoral or improper (Akindele and Adegbite, 1999: 7). As noted by Humphries (1999: <http://www2.gol.com/users/rick/ac3.html>), taboos ultimately express a society's concern for itself and act as a forward line of defense. Among the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria, just like in many other cultures in Africa and several parts of the world, there are a number of taboo words relating to various aspects of people's lives (sex, food, hygiene, death and so on). The Yoruba people, for example, do not often describe the genitals by their technical terms. It is also, taboo, for example, to mention women's menstrual activity by name. Although swearing (*eebu* in Yoruba) may be revolting, it is not considered as bad as using vulgar or obscene words (*oro rirun*) among the Yoruba people. Thus, it is possible for a Yoruba speaker of English as a second language to react more negatively to such taboo words relating to genitals than to such swear words as 'bastard' and 'bitch'. In other

words, Yoruba speakers of English as a second language might tend to avoid the use of the sex-related taboo English words more than the swear words. Saville-Troike (1989: 218 cited in Humphries, 1999; also citing Haas, 1944: 489-494), notes, for example, that Thai learners of English avoid certain words of Thai origin that have phonetic similarities to English taboo words while they also avoid English words with corresponding similarities to taboo Thai words. However, it must be mentioned that social attitudes within societies tend to alter radically as many are, today, in a state of flux. Thus taboo words as well as reactions to them are changing such that in certain societies or communities some taboo words may be beginning to lose their original force (Humphries: *ibid.*). Moore (1999), in an article in *New Statesman* (<http://www.findarticles.com>), notes, for example, the ways the print media seem to be worried about the use of the word 'fucking' and says that though the word 'fuck' is beginning to become accepted in newspapers, the "c-word" (that is, 'cunt') is still a problem.

Although it is important to note that in many cultures severe taboo is associated with words connected with sex, it must be mentioned that there is likely to be significant variance among societies and within groups in a given society in terms of use and attitudes to such words. One important aspect of this variation in use is that it is believed that men and women differ in their usage. The literature shows that the belief that women's language is more polite and more refined is very widespread and has been current for many centuries (Coates, 1986: 19; see also Jespersen, 1927; cited in Gramley and Patzold, 1995). Thus the use of vulgar language is often less associated with women. As noted by Gramley and Patzold (*ibid.*: 266), a number of studies show that men are more likely, than women, to use obscene expressions. In most societies that frown at the use of taboo language by women, it is generally held that men use taboo words more than the women. In such societies, women therefore tend to use what are described as "polished" and "more refined" words than men (see also, Lakoff, 1975; Salami, (2004).

Salami (*ibid.*) observes, in an earlier study, that gender differences have been a major topic of interest in language study. Although Coates (1986), observes that there is little evidence on male/female differences in swearing, she acknowledges that the folklinguistic belief that there are differences is widespread. The reasons for the perceived sex differences in language use have been suggested to include the differences in the socialization of men and women, the prestige consciousness of women as against men's desire for solidarity and men and women's different social network patterns (see, for example, Trudgill, 1972; Lakoff, 1975; Smith, 1985;

Cameron and Coates, 1985; Coates, 1986; Milroy, 1987; Abu-Haidar, 1989; Tannen, 1990; Salami, 1991; 2004b). In the Yoruba-speaking southwestern Nigeria, women are expected to be less aggressive, more polite and more circumspect in their speech. This is because it is largely a patriarchal society (Salami, 2004a). Although we are not aware of any systematic sociolinguistic study of the interaction between religion and the use of language in Nigeria, the use of taboo words among the Yoruba is also likely to be influenced by speakers' moral and/or religious inclination. The use of such words would be considered, for example, as an act of shamelessness (*'ainitiju'*) or a lack of morals.

With the Nigerian society becoming more and more assimilated into the global village, college and university students are increasingly influenced both by the cultural values from the west and the middle-east, including movies (on videos, satellite television and the internet), Pentecostalism, and fashion, as well as the spread of Muslim fundamentalism. As observed by Wannagat (2002: 359), the emergence of English as the 'New Latin' directly supports the process of globalisation and as a means of communication, it contributes to the global dimension of cultural values and institutions and the flow of images and data. Furthermore, as noted by Graddol (1997, cited in Adetugbo, 2002:2), world economies and cultures are becoming increasingly interconnected and interdependent, politically, socially, and technologically such that today in Nigeria, the American English is the language of Nigerian disc jockeys.

The various influences observed above tend to impact on Nigerian young adults and adolescents in their use and attitudes to the English language. Nigerian young adults and adolescents who tend to watch movies and home videos from the west are wont to copy the language behaviour of the characters they see in them; thinking that it is 'hip' to be able to behave in like manner. It has been observed that the use of unconventional or undesirable speech reaches a peak in adolescence because they are trying to experiment with identity, seek negative attention, rebel against authority figures, and question rules, boundaries, and social norms (The Gale Encyclopedia of Childhood and Adolescence'- <http://www.findarticles.com>). Thus it is also noted that offensive language seems to be more frequent in the US today because of social changes such as changing media standards, increasing acceptance of sexuality and sexual expression, decreased influence of religion, and so on (The Gale Encyclopedia of Childhood and Adolescence: *ibid.*). In Nigeria, however, our cursory observation is that those who use the taboo words are often seen as either talking dirty, vulgar or morally deficient. Thus complaints are agog in the mainstream

Nigerian society of the negative influence of home videos and movies from the west (see, for example, Ajiboye, 2003). Examples of such English words commonly found in the speech of these young adults are 'fuck', 'cunt', 'dick' and 'shit'.

The present study, which is an investigation into the use and attitudes toward taboo words of English origin, sets therefore, to examine the relationship between use and attitudes toward these words and the differences according to the gender of speaker and religious inclination. While gender, as noted earlier, has been shown, in quite a number of studies, to correlate to language behaviour, it is one assumption of the present study that speakers' use and attitudes towards taboo, swear words and dirty or obscene language in Nigeria can be influenced also by their religious or moral inclinations.

Methodology

This study was conducted at Obafemi Awolowo University located in Ile-Ife, the heartland of the Yoruba region in southwestern Nigeria. The research instruments involved the use of a questionnaire and oral interviews. In the choice of sampling, the study employed the judgmental sampling technique. That is to say that respondents were purposively sampled to reflect gender and Yoruba background. One hundred (100) undergraduates who are Yoruba-speaking were sampled in all. There are 50 male and 50 female students. The questionnaire was administered on one-on-one basis in face-to-face interviews. The students interviewed come from different disciplines in the university. The questionnaire used focused on the students' use as well as attitudes toward English taboo words. The specific words investigated were 'shit', 'fuck', 'bastard', 'dick', 'bitch' and 'cunt'.

It is, perhaps, important to mention that the following assumptions were formulated to guide the research:

1. that men are more likely, than women, to report use of taboo words;
2. that men are more likely, than women, to be more negatively disposed to users of taboo words;
3. that men and women that are religiously-inclined are less likely to report taboo usage than those that are less-religiously inclined; and
4. that women in Nigeria are more religiously-inclined than men and, therefore, are more likely to be influenced by their religion than the men in their use and attitudes to taboo words.

Data Analysis

1- Gender and the use of taboo words.

In this section, we present the data on the self-reports of interviewees on the use of English taboo words. We had asked the students question of the frequency of use of the words "shit", 'fuck', 'bastard', 'dick' and 'cunt' in their linguistic practices. The results show that more male respondents (32/50 or 64%) reported the use of the swear word 'shit' than the female students (20/50 or 40%). The chi-square shows that there is a significant association between the reported use of the word and gender of speaker ($p < 0.02$). For the word 'fuck', as in the expression 'fuck you', the results also show that more male students (24/50 or 48%) claimed to use the expression than the female students (12/50 or 24%). The chi-square result shows that there is a significant association between the reported use of the word 'fuck' and gender of the user ($p < 0.01$).

The responses to the question whether or not they use the swear word 'bastard' show that more male claimed to use the word than the female respondents. The chi-square shows, however, that there is no significant association between the reported use of the word and gender.

We had also asked the students about their use of the word 'dick'. The data show that more male students (6/50 or 12%), than the female (2/50 or 4%), claimed to use it. The chi-square shows, however, that there is no significant association between the reported usage of 'dick' and the gender of the speaker ($p < 0.1$).

In response to the question of use of the swear word 'bitch', the results show that more male students (24% or 12/50) reported its use than the female students (4% or 2/50). The differences in the students' self-reports for are highly significant (chi-square = 0.004). In other words, there is some association between gender and the reported use of 'bitch' among the students. When we asked whether or not the students use the word 'cunt', the result show that a higher percentage of the male students (10/50 or 23%), than the female (9/50 or 18%), claimed that they use 'cunt'. In other words, 'cunt' seems to occur more in the speech of male young adults than in the female speech. However, the chi-square score show is 0.6. In other words, there is no significant association between the gender of a student and his/her reported use of the word 'cunt'.

When we tried to look at the relative frequency of self-reports on use of the English taboo expressions among the students, the data show that 24% of the respondents claimed to use the taboo words frequently, 24% rarely, 37% occasionally while 15% claimed not to use them at all. Of those who claimed to use the words frequently, 30% are male and 18% are female students. Also, more female students (22% or 11/50), than the male (8% or 4/50), claimed not to use the words at all. It must be noted, however, that the differences in the self-reports of the male and female students are not statistically significant ($p < 0.2$). In other words, it seems that speaker-gender does not correlate with the frequency of occurrence of the words in the students' speech.

2- The Influence of Context of Use

Sociolinguistic studies have shown that language use is not only influenced by social factors as age, class, gender and occupation but also by the context of use. When we sought to know in what contexts the students interviewed for this study tended to use the taboo expressions, the data show that 43 or 43% of the total number of the students interviewed claimed that they tend to use the taboo words in any context while 42% claimed to use them when angry and 15% use them when 'gisting' (that is, in casual conversation). There are, however, no statistically significant differences between the self-reports of the male and female students in terms of the context of use of these taboo words.

The question of context of use of language may also include the person with whom a speaker is in interaction/interlocution. The data show that most students (44% or 44/100) claimed they never used the taboo words. Although the differences are not statistically significant, the data show that it is the female students, than male, who claimed not to use the taboo words at all. When the self-reports were analysed in terms of the person of interlocution, we observe that more male young adults, than the female, claimed to use the words among their friends while more of the female, than the male, claimed to use these same words in the presence of just anybody. It is not apparent why more female students would claim to use the words in any context than their male counterparts. There is, however, no statistically significant association between these self-reports on context of use of taboo words and the gender of the speaker. We, however, proceeded to examine the relationship between the reported use of these words and the students' religious inclinations to see if they constitute some influence on the students' reported use and attitudes to the taboo words.

3- Religious inclination and the use of taboo words

We mentioned earlier that religion or one's religious inclinations might influence one's use or non-use of taboo words (p. 3). For example, one's religion could be that which does not only tolerate but preaches against what is considered 'loose' or 'immoral' talk' as 'swearing' (*eebu*) and taboo words (*oro rirun*). In Nigeria today, religious inclinations are demonstrated in whether or not one is a 'born again' Christian and belongs to a fellowship or one is a 'good Muslim' who regularly offers the five daily prayers. Such inclinations are also expected to be manifested in one's willingness to shun loose or lewd talk or use of abusive language – a practice which is considered as a mark of moral uprightness and 'Christianly' or 'Islamic' behaviour.

When we asked our respondents about their religious inclinations, the data show that a substantial majority of the students claimed to be religious (62/100) while 18% claimed not to be religious and 20% claimed to be indifferent to religion. The data also show that more of the female students (36/50) seem to be more religiously-inclined than the males (26/50). The differences observed are statistically significant (chi-square: 0.03). However, when we tried to look at the distribution of respondents according to the question of religious inclination and its interaction with reported use of the taboo words, we find no significant differences between the male and female students' responses. Also, when we tried to see if there are interactions of religious inclinations and gender of respondents in the self-reported use of each word, we observe that there are differences but the associations are not statistically significant.

4- Attitudes toward the taboo words

The study also examined the attitudes of the students to the taboo words. Here, the students were asked to rate the use of the taboo words using the following words: 'not bad', 'bad', 'hip' and 'indifferent' – to characterize their feeling towards the use of the words. The result shows that, generally, a greater percentage of the students are inclined to perceive the use of the words negatively than positively (63/100). However, more female students (40/50 or 80%), than the male (23/50 or 46%), claimed they considered the use of the taboo words 'bad' while 20% or 10/50 of the male students as against 10% or 5/50 of the females claimed that the use of the words is 'hip'. The differences in the responses to these questions are highly significant (chi-square = 0.002).

Furthermore, the students were asked to describe the type of student that would use these taboo words. The question, which was an open-ended one, yielded three main classificatory types of student users of English taboo expressions: (i) 'happening students', (ii) bad boys and girls and (iii) carefree people/students. The results show that most of the respondents do not consider users of the four-letter words as bad people. In other words, it seems the students generally are more positively disposed to users of the expressions. However, we will observe that a large number of the respondents (44%) claimed that these words used mostly by 'happening students' words. The label 'happening students' marks a category of Nigerian university students (male and female) who are considered, among their peers, as 'outgoing', 'power-dressers' and drive expensive cars. Although the results show that there are differences in the categorizations by the male and female respondents, these differences are not statistically significant (chi-square = 0.4).

Conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted to demonstrate sex differences in the use and attitudes toward English taboo words among Nigerian young adults using English as a second language. From the study, we will observe first, that generally the male young adults use all the six taboo words more than the female. There are, however, statistically significant associations between reported use of only four of the taboo words and gender. These are 'shit', 'fuck' and 'bitch'. In other words, these words can be said to be markers of young adult Nigerian male speech. This study seems, therefore, to confirm the folklinguistic belief that women's speech is more polished than men's and that women, more than men, tend to avoid the use of vulgar and obscene words.

Secondly, the study shows that religion has no significant influence on the students' use of the English taboo words. This runs counter to our assumption, at the conception of this study, that religion would be influential in the use of the taboo words. Finally, the study also demonstrates that the female students, by their attitudes, are more negatively disposed to the use of the taboo words than the male and this seems to tally with the women's self-reports on taboo usage.

It is important to note, however, that although this paper has demonstrated gender differences in language use among Nigerian young adults, the behaviour of both the male and female users of the taboo words require some explanation beyond gender. It is not clear from this study what factor(s) could actually be responsible for the

female students reporting less use of the English taboo words or why the male young adults report more because there might be some other factor(s) such as the network of friendship on the university campus and regularity of access to foreign movies and home videos which we have not investigated. Therefore, these factors would need to be focused in a further investigation of the use of English taboo words by Nigerian university undergraduates.

Furthermore, it might be in order to point out that what the young adults who reported the use of English taboo words demonstrate in this study (which they think is 'hip') is probably the lack of awareness of their undesirability and/or unacceptability even in the target (Western) culture. Therefore, it would be very useful for Nigerian teachers of English as an L2, while guiding learners to acquire conventional English speech, to talk about these words and try to point out the contexts in which they tend to occur and the need for learners to be careful with their use in communicating with others.

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