

Bilinguals' Reaction to Taboos: A Case Study on Persian Speaking Azari Natives

Nasibe Asefi

M.A.

“English Teaching as a Foreign Language”,

**Lecturer and Head of the English Department of Feizoleslam Institute of
Higher Education**

Iran

Abstract

Bilingualism and its characteristics, as well as differences of conveying feelings in first and second language, among bilinguals have long been challenges for sociolinguists. Most bilinguals state that expressing their feelings through first language helps them convey exactly what they intend to, and that saying or hearing taboos in their first language bear more mental reaction. This study aims to briefly review the concept of linguistics taboo as a culture-dependent element and further discuss the differences of revealing feelings regarding taboos in the first and the second languages. In this study 40 female students, BA and MA participated, Turkish-Persian bilingual students, originally from Turkish areas of Iran; such as Tabriz, Zanajn, Ardebil, and Hamedan. This article seeks an answer to this question that whether expressing taboos in first language (Turkish) imposes more mental burden on speaker/hearer compared to second language or it makes no difference.

Keywords: bilingualism, bilinguals, first language, second language, Turkish, Persian, taboo

1. Introduction

Language is a social phenomenon, although it is under the effect of values and norms of society, it affects them as well. This interaction between language and society has caused a lot of structural similarities between different languages. Many social factors including social class, race group, gender, social context,... affect language. All of these factors are the subject of language sociological considerations. Different social factors make different language varieties which have their own special qualities and are able to discriminate informants. Society's culture and values also affect that language, which is why society's values change; because language is changing all the time. It can be said that like a mirror, language reflects culture and values of every society and by studying it we can gain a lot of information about different societies. Development of societies cause bilingualism increase; a process is called bilingualism in which the person learns two languages in a parallel way (simultaneously), this kind of bilingualism is rare. People often learn one language after another and use each language in different situations (Stranzy, 2005:4).

There are different kinds of bilingualism; 1. Simultaneous bilingualism in which person learns two languages at the same environment and condition from childhood. 2. Sequential bilingualism which person learns second language after learning mother tongue which is dominant in person's mind over second language (F. Gonzalez-regiosa, 1941)

1.1 Taboo's definition

The word taboo has been taken from a Polynesian Language called Tonegan. In a general sense, all prohibited behaviors are called taboo and this prohibition is because of socio-cultural view toward special behaviors (Ma'dani, 1378). Every society has criteria for valuing or disregarding some behaviors which might be different from other societies' criteria. In fact Language taboo is one aspect of social taboos which is referred to as prohibitions in language behavior.

Modaresi (1368:79) believes that "taboos in language are related to the words and expressions which are not mentioned because of their negative connotations and using them provokes embarrassment and negative reactions from society. There are words and expressions in every language which have a negative face or unpleasant, unfavorable and impolite concept. Therefore the members of language society avoid using them directly and explicitly; these aspects are called language prohibitions or "taboos". Taboo includes a wide

spectrum of actions, behaviors and words which doing, stating or referring to them supposed to be a kind of inconsideration and recklessness according to religion, society and culture. Thus a taboo action must not be done and a taboo word must not be expressed (G. Hughes). Generally it can be stated that Freud (1925) has presented the most artistically definition form the taboo's overt irrational nature. He believes taboo is originated from unknown social approaches which their effect are seen as the prohibition of some actions or restraining from expressing some words. Nevertheless there is an unconscious strong leaning toward them.

1. The effect of emotional load of a taboo on choosing words in language

Observations and researches on bilinguals emphasize that when bilinguals speak in second language they experience less emotions. Most bilinguals remember their first language words and phrases when they want to express their deep emotions (Dewaele, 2004, 2008; Bond & Lai, 1986; Gonzalez Regiosa, 1976; Marian & Kaushanskaya, 2004; Pavlenko, 2002, 2005; Schrauf, 2000; Altarriba & Santiago, 1994). Ferr (2010) investigates bilinguals' semantic load of emotional words in a study and concludes that words usually undertake more emotional and semantic load in first language. Bilinguals prefer to use second language when they are talking about taboos because it has less emotional load for them (Dewaele, 2004, 2008; Bond & Lai, 1986). Gonzalez Regiosa (1976) believes that while speaking in second language, people usually can easily repeat swears and taboos which are difficult for them to express in their first language. Researches on bilingualism show that second language is mostly used to increase emotional distance (Gumperz & Hernandez, 1971; Javier & Marcos, 1989; Caldwell-Harris & Dinn, 1989).

Bilinguals repeatedly reported that their power of expressing their emotion in first language is far beyond their second language, a study was conducted on Turk bilingual students whose second language was English, the skin conductivity response reaction of participants while hearing emotional phrases in English were compared to the same phrases in Turkish language. The results showed that the amount of conveyance flow was more when participants expressed the phrases in Turkish language. In another study which was conducted with the same participants, it was concluded that when bilinguals lie in Turkish, they show more emotions and reactions. Voice vibration, pupils' movements are more comparing to when they are lying in English. Caldwell-Harris & Dinn (2009) believe that the words with more emotional load will stay more in mind. By investigating positive and negative words in bilinguals' first and second language they concluded that although people

have learned second language in early years in their lives, the number of emotional words with semantic load in their first language is more than in their second language. Words' emotional load is observed less in second language because you can't find second language emotional load of words, backgrounds and emotional contexts which exist in people's mind from childhood. Even puerile punitive phrases like "shame on you" have more mental effect in first language than second language in bilingual and third language in trilingual children (Harris, 2004).

According to Ma'dani (2008) there are two kinds of taboo: Incomplete taboo which refers to the taboos that will be constrained in application only to special situations and usages; in fact in this case the word which become taboo isn't put aside completely. Using these words is avoided in some cultures, for example in Japanese words related to putting on clothes and in English words related to death are some of the words which are considered incomplete taboos. In some societies including some Australian tribes, using words for calling mother in law, mother's brother (uncle is prohibited and is like a taboo). This is somehow because of lack of valuing relative relationships and mother relatives. The second kind of taboo, complete taboo refers to the taboo words which reach such a negative load degree that almost all of people regardless of their job and social class dislike expressing and hearing them.

If a word becomes a complete taboo it is possible to be put aside completely from the usual language. According to Lehmann (1992: 260) taboo words are those words which speakers avoid using them and it at least happens in polite communication, like taboo word "shit"; it is possible that people who see it in their second language find nothing unusual about it and it wouldn't have any emotional or semantic meaning for them.

Allan (2006) and Nothman (1962) argue that taboo is a way by which people censor their written and spoken language. They also know taboo as a limitation for behaviors which have negative effects on people's lives. Allan (2006) has put taboos in several categories: 1. Liquids which secrete from body (such as sweat, snot, liquids related to menses,...). 2. Sexual organs and actions, urine and defecate actions. 3. Diseases, death and murdering. 4. The name of holy and supreme people and actions 5. Collecting, saving and consuming food. By detailed and general investigating of different cultures he concluded that taboos are different in different cultures.

It is possible that expressing a taboo word which is easily used in everyday conversation in a language society entails an intense mental feedback in another society. Van Oudenhoven & [et. al., 2008] investigated different taboos in eleven cultures. 3000 participants from Spain, Germany, France, Italy, Croatia, Poland, Great Britain, United States, Norway, Greece and Netherland participated in this study. The participants were asked to write swear and taboo words they use in provocative situations. 12000 phrases were gathered, after categorization of phrases it was concluded that taboos vary greatly in different cultures and hearing taboo for some people lead to very intense reaction. For example in United States, South American boys are more sensitive to their masculine power than North American boys.

The existence of complete taboo words and concepts affects word choice and usage. This effect is even more than the effect of incomplete taboo words. For example, one of the solutions that is somehow common for avoiding some of unpleasant language forms is language borrowing by which foreign language elements or unfamiliar accent elements, undesirability of which is not so obvious and clear are substituted for native language unpleasant and inappropriate language.

In other words in these cases “the reason for language borrowing and the motivation of speakers of a language in using a foreign language elements is undesirability and unpleasantness of some of native language forms. It seems words such as underpants and buttocks and so on are common in Persian Language because Persian speakers avoid using their Persian equivalent which have a clearer and a more unpleasant concept (Modaresi, 1988:79). Such a language borrowing is observed in the language behavior of speakers who are familiar with more than one accent or dialect, for example using the Turkish word /pox/ (shit) instead of its Persian equivalent.

Abharian (1389) Quoting from Penalosa (1981) says that expressing some words is prohibited because they are holy, vulgar or heinous or because they refer to sexual organs. All of these are determined by culture and because cultures change, language taboos also change.

Arlato (1972: 227) puts taboos in that class of factors which regardless of the importance they have in description and classification of historical events, they also are the cause and

motivation of emergence or destruction of language forms in many cases. He says “language taboo can be construed as the avoidance of application of special words because of different social reasons. Avoiding words application will lead to two results; taboo word is eliminated completely as an innocent form which is harmonic with or will be changed phonemically. It is possible that religious, superstitious, personal respect, social view toward sexual actions or other matters are the reasons for avoiding using a word. Akmajian et al., (1995) refer to this point that sometimes bilinguals or multilingual speakers avoid expressing words which are similar to their first language taboos, in second or third language.

For example American university students who are learning Brazilian Portuguese often feel embarrassed when they are learning the word “feca” which means knife because the Portuguese pronunciation of this word is close to the pronunciation of the taboo word “fuck” in English. In Persian also some words related to body organs, some actions, vulgar words and low level jobs’ common words have a taboo state, such as pissing, porky, (Which means fat) and so on.

2. Statistical community

The results were achieved by distributing questionnaire, recording and analyzing responses. This paper is focused on Turkish-Persian bilinguals because Turkish language is spoken in a wide geographic area of Iran. The participants of this study were 40 undergraduate and graduated Turkish-Persian bilingual university students who were chosen from different Turk residence areas like Tabriz, Ardebil, Zanjan and Hamedan provinces of Iran. The participants’ first language is Turkish and they have learned Persian as their second language before the age of five.

Because of the lack of the skin conductivity response measuring system for measuring the amount of reaction to expressing and hearing first and second language taboos, inevitably data were collected by using questionnaires, then the responses were recorded and the the situations in which a Turkish language person hears these Turkish taboos were described. 20 questions were outlined in the questionnaires that contained some taboos in Turkish language and put the person in a hypothetical situation while expressing or hearing language taboos, by ranking the amount of reaction and the amount of tabooeness in that situation from very high, high, average, low to very low semantic load, data were analyzed.

Taboos questionnaires can be divided into four general categories:

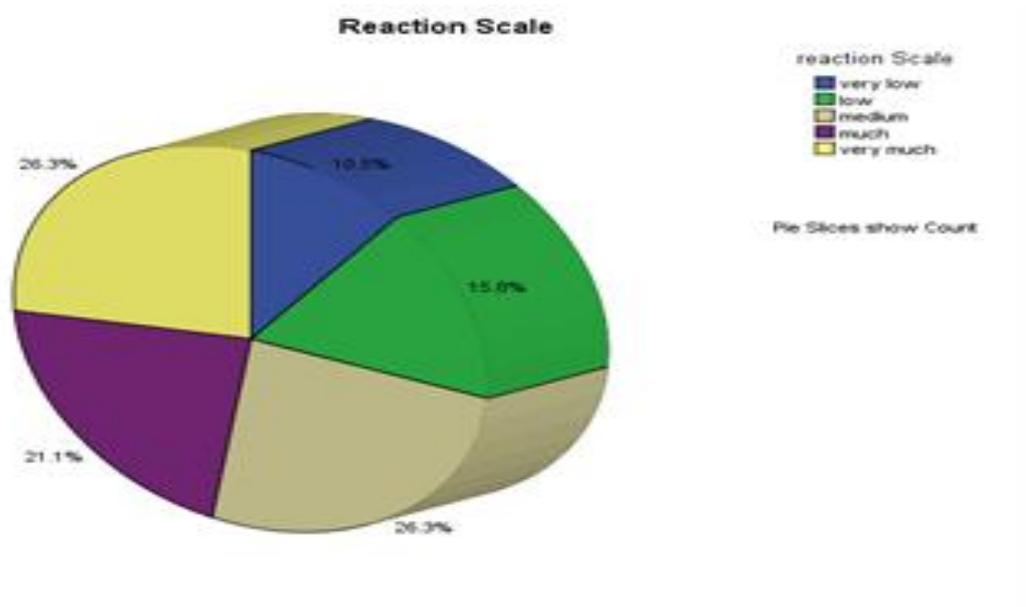
1. Nasty words which can't be stated freely such as / i:ʃi yirinə muyammir ¹
2. Words which belong to street talk such as / pox yi:pdə ²
3. Words which are related to physical and mental conditions such as / əbʒI:lan san³ / /ɔdælidə/
4. Words related to urine and defecate such as //i:ʃæmæqəmva:r/ ⁴/osterdə ⁵/

Here some questionnaires examples will be mentioned.

a) in a formal family gathering which all family elders are present your child tells you /leshmaqim var/ What semantic load does this phrase have comparing to let's go to W.C.?

Explain how you express taboo words in these situations? Write alternative words.

Figure 1: the scale of bilinguals reaction towards taboo words



The results of the paper's investigation and data analyses show that in 10.5 percent of cases Turkish language people express taboo words easily, and in 15.8 percent of cases instead of using taboo words they use facial expressions, gestures and sometimes silence. In 26.3 percent other cases instead of taboo words they benefited from other words such as *something*

¹ Turkish word means "Being unable to have sex"

² Turkish word means "shit"

³ Turkish word means "stupid"

⁴ Turkish word means "Urinate"

⁵ Turkish word means "farting"

and *what*. And near 21.1 percent of cases the reaction is very severe and in a way they tried to convey the intended meaning by using sentences such as “I don’t know how to tell” or “you know I can’t say” and like that. In 26.3 percent of cases they severely tried to avoid even these words’ marginal applications.

3. Discussion

In this study there were Turkish language participants whose Turkish language was their first language and they learned Persian in their early childhood mostly in school. They showed that first language taboos have more semantic load for them comparing to second language taboos. This issue can be considered in psychological and cognitive discussions. This issue that communicating feeling and emotional load is less in second language sometimes is used a lot. For example doctors and nurses use scientific equivalents which are usually English when they are talking about the organs and diseases that will embarrass the patient or multilingual speakers use their second or whatever language they know when they want to express emotional matters which are difficult for them to express in their first language.

Participants of the present study say that conveying concepts containing emotions in first language is easier for them and they can convey the matter truly by using their first language. Common point in more than 85 percent of responses is that in most cases Turkish swears have a very higher mental effect and in most cases hearing Persian swears even the nastiest ones seems ridiculous. While these swears’ Turkish equivalents are considered taboo and even hearing them are unpleasant and have negative emotional load. For example according to questionnaires the word /*oll*⁶/ comparing to the word *die* is more meaningful for these bilinguals or in their thought semantic load of /*Qoromsaq*/ comparing to *bastard* is much higher and the first word has much more mental effect and feedback for them. Eighty percent of these people announce that Turkish words make a clearer image in their mind.

4. Results

This paper investigated the difference of communicating emotions in expressing and hearing first and second language taboos. The paper’s participants’ first and second languages were respectively Turkish and Persian. By reviewing researches conducted before, this point was

⁶ Turkish word means “die”

highlighted that for bilinguals communicating emotions in first language is easier than communicating emotions in second language. Bilinguals tend to express first language taboos in second language and this shows that first language is the most familiar and immediate cognitive system. This research is a brief study of the difference of bilingual reactions to taboos in their first and second language. Because of the importance of the bilingual matters in language sociology and also the abundance of bilinguals including Turkish-Persian, Kurdish-Persian and other languages in our country, Iran, the writer suggests investigating language taboos in Iran's different dialects and cultures and also in trilingual.

References

- Abharian, Solmaz. 1999. Comparative studies about Taboos and euphemism in Persian and Turkish language. Tehran: Alzahra.
- Akmajian, A-Demers & Ak-Harnish Ra-Farmer. RM (1995) Linguistics: An Introduction to Language and Communication: Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Allan, Keith & Kate Burridge. 2006. Forbidden words: Taboo and the censoring of language: Cambridge University Press.
- Altarriba, Jeanette & Azara L Santiago-Rivera. 1994. Current perspectives on using linguistic and cultural factors in counseling the Hispanic client. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 25.388.
- Arlotto, Anthony. 1972. Introduction to historical linguistics: Houghton Mifflin.
- Bond, Michael H & Tat-Ming Lai. 1986. Embarrassment and code-switching into a second language. *The Journal of Social Psychology*.
- Caldwell-Harris, Catherine L & Ayşe Ayçiçeği-Dinn. 2009. Emotion and lying in a non-native language. *International Journal of Psychophysiology* 71.193-204.
- Chamizo Domínguez, Pedro J. 2009. Linguistic interdiction: Its status quaestionis and possible future research lines. *Language Sciences* 31.428-46.
- Dewaele, Jean-Marc. 2004. The emotional force of swearwords and taboo words in the speech of multilinguals. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 25.204-22.
- . 2008. The emotional weight of I love you in multilinguals' languages. *Journal of Pragmatics* 40.1753-80.
- Dewaele, Jean-Marc & Aneta Pavlenko. 2002. Emotion vocabulary in interlanguage. *Language Learning* 52.263-322.
- Ferré, Pilar, Teófilo García, Isabel Fraga, Rosa Sánchez-Casas & Margarita Molero. 2010. Memory for emotional words in bilinguals: Do words have the same emotional intensity in the first and in the second language? *Cognition and Emotion* 24.760-85.
- Freud, Sigmund, James Strachey & Albert Dickson. 1985. The origins of religion: Totem and taboo, Moses and monotheism and other works: Penguin.
- González, Josué M. 2008. Encyclopedia of bilingual education: Sage Publications.
- Gonzalez-Reigosa, Fernando. 1973. The anxiety-arousing effect of taboo words in bilinguals: ProQuest Information & Learning.

- Gumperz, JJ & E Hernandez. 1971. Bilingualism, bidialectalism, and classroom interaction in language and social groups: Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Harris, Catherine L, Ayse Aycicegi & Jean Berko Gleason. 2003. Taboo words and reprimands elicit greater autonomic reactivity in a first language than in a second language. *Applied Psycholinguistics* 24.561-79.
- Hughes, Geoffrey. 1998. Swearing: A social history of foul language, oaths and profanity in English: Penguin UK.
- Javier, Rafael A. 1989. Linguistic considerations in the treatment of bilinguals. *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 6.87.
- Javier, Rafael A & Luis R Marcos. 1989. The role of stress on the language-independence and code-switching phenomena. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research* 18.449-72.
- Lehmann, Winfred P. 2013. Historical linguistics: an introduction: Routledge.
- Madani, Mitra. 1998. studying language taboos and different kinds of taboos. *Linguistics of Tehran*.
- Marian, Viorica & Margarita Kaushanskaya. 2004. Self-construal and emotion in bicultural bilinguals. *Journal of Memory and Language* 51.190-201.
- Modaresi, Yahya. 1989. an introduction to sociolinguistics Tehran: cultural studies institutions.
- Monzalvo, Karla & Ghislaine Dehaene-Lambertz. 2013. How reading acquisition changes children's spoken language network. *Brain and Language* 127.356-65.
- Nothman, Fred H. 1962. The influence of response conditions on recognition thresholds for tabu words. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 65.154-61.
- Pavlenko, Aneta. 2002. Bilingualism and emotions. *Multilingua* 21.4578.
- . 2006. Bilingual minds: Emotional experience, expression and representation: *Multilingual Matters*.
- Penalosa, Fernando. 1981. Introduction to the Sociology of Language: Newbury House Publishers Rowley, MA.
- Schrauf, Robert W. 2000. Bilingual autobiographical memory: Experimental studies and clinical cases. *Culture & Psychology* 6.387-417.
- Stranzy, P. 2005. Encyclopedia of Linguistics, 2 vols. Fitzroy Dearborn, New York, NY.
- Trudgill, Peter. 2000. Sociolinguistics: An introduction to language and society: Penguin UK.
- Van Oudenhoven, Jan Pieter, Boele de Raad, Françoise Askevis-Leherpeux, Pawel Boski, Geir Scott Brunborg, Carmen Carmona, Dick Barelds, Charles T Hill, Boris Mlačić &

Frosso Motti. 2008. Terms of abuse as expression and reinforcement of cultures.
International Journal of Intercultural Relations 32.174-85.