

## **A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF USE AND PERCEPTION OF INSULTS: TLEMCEEN SPEECH COMMUNITY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Human beings use language to accomplish a variety of social acts. They are supposed to select from the whole grammatical correct expressions available to them, the ones which appropriately reflect the social norms that are settled to them for specific occasions. However, using speech goes beyond selecting correct grammatical sentences. This implies that each speech obeys the forbidden rules. Hence, it is not sufficient to acquire linguistic competence to speak adequately and to behave in a suitable and acceptable manner. It should be borne in mind that in addition to the environments and the social structure of a given speech community, its values can also have effects on its language. The most interesting way in which this may happen is through the phenomenon known as taboo which can be characterized by behaviours that are believed to be supernaturally forbidden, or regarded as immoral or improper.

**Keywords:** Language, culture, linguistic competence, speech community, taboo.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Language is one of the most salient elements in human life; it is used to attain a variety of social and cultural goals. In speech, some lexical items are considered as being normal, elegant and acceptable. However, taboo words especially are never regarded as acceptable speech forms of the conservative speakers of a language. Simultaneously, language reflects the culture of its users and, at the same time, it is influenced and shaped by it. It also reflects the social values and differentiates between the masculine and the feminine world, because men and women are supposed to use different styles in their communication. Thus, each individual requires a linguistic code in order to communicate his/her unique experiences.

In this regard, the focus of the present paper will be on the type of relationship between language and culture which may result in different ways of speaking. Taboo language and its categories, including euphemism which can be used as an accepted channel to replace harmful terms will be taken into consideration to illustrate these ways of speaking.

### **Taboo as a Linguistic Fact**

The word "Tabu" is an Austronesian term; more precisely its origin is from Polynesia. It was first discovered by Captain Cook<sup>1</sup> who translates it to English and thus becomes "Taboo",

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<sup>1</sup> - Captain Cook: Among the many discoveries of Captain James Cook was a linguistic one, the term taboo. In a journal entry from 1777, Cook says this word "has a very comprehensive meaning; but, in general, signifies that a thing is forbidden, when anything is forbidden to be eaten, or made use of, they say, that it is taboo." Cook was in

meaning “sacred prohibition” or “ritual prohibition”. In fact, Taboo words occur very frequently in all languages. They are connected with speech which is extremely prohibited. Trudgill (1995:17) describes them as follows:

Taboo can be characterized as being concerned with behaviour which is believed to be supernaturally forbidden, or regarded as immoral or improper; it deals with behaviour which is prohibited or inhibited in an apparently irrational manner. In language, taboo is associated with things which are not said, and in particular with words and expressions which are not used. In practice, of course, this simply means that there are inhibitions about the normal use of items of this kind.

Moreover, taboo words may cause shame and anxiety, as they can communicate a number of emotions such as anger, frustration and happiness. Sometimes they are used deliberately in order to achieve several sorts of personal and interpersonal outcomes that may be either positive or negative in terms of their impact on others. As far as the former is concerned, a speaker may avoid a physical struggle when he insults the others. This act may help him at least to relieve his anger, as it may arouse the feeling of the others and thus a physical fight is expected, particularly with men.

A kind of humour can also be attained within groups by telling stories or jokes including taboo expressions. This may consolidate and ameliorate the relationships between the members of that group. Accordingly, taboo lexicons can pave the way to a myriad of social purposes that ordinary speech cannot. Though, they aim at provoking harm mainly, they are capable to intensify the emotional communication. Besides, people need to relieve themselves of depression, anger...etc. So, they select these terms to accomplish these goals. Furthermore, breaking the rules is sometimes an efficient way chosen in order to strengthen the relationships between people.

Taboo words, are discussed in terms of categories. Both A. Montagu (2001) and T. Jay (1996) identify approximately a similar set of categories that include: profanity, obscenity, vulgar language, insult and name-calling.

### **Categories of Taboo lexicons**

Though, people in a single speech community use different forms of the same language to attain similar or different purposes, the forms of a language that reflect socially acceptable usage are universals. It is true that societies differ in what topics are taboos, but when we approach the taboo categories we nearly identify the same prohibitions. Words denoting taboo subjects which are considered socially unacceptable in all societies are as follows

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the Friendly Islands (now Tonga) at the time, so even though similar words occur in other Polynesian languages, the form taboo from Tongan tabu is the one we have borrowed. The Tongans used tabu as an adjective. Cook, besides borrowing the word into English, also made it into a noun referring to the prohibition itself and a verb meaning "to make someone or something taboo." From its origins in Polynesia the word taboo has traveled as widely as Cook himself and is now used throughout the English-speaking world.

<http://www.answers.com/topic/taboo#ixzz1awp42D00> 16/10/2011

## **Profanity**

“Profane” which is the adjective of profanity, originally means “outside the temple” in Latin, and therefore referred to items not belonging to religion. Hence, a language which has the power to offend and a language which is extremely taboo are two distinct features that symbolize profanity. Montagu (ibid: 102) writes that “profane” actually means “the abuse of anything sacred”. Thus, profanity refers either to a word or expression that shows disrespect or desecration of someone or something (holy things especially). Jay (ibid: 10) describes “profanity” in a similar manner to that of Montagu. He writes:

To be profane means to be secular or ... [t]o be ignorant or intolerant of the guidelines of a particular religious order, but profanity is not a direct attack on the church or religion. It is thus, a form of rebellion that describes all the insulting and rude words or expressions used irreverently against anyone.

## **Obscenity**

Montagu (ibid: 105) defines this category as follows “obscenity is a form of swearing that makes use of indecent words and phrases”, whereas Jay (ibid: 14) defines it simply as “unprotected speech”. He adds “while the notion of taboo restricts or inhibits what speakers say, obscenity functions to protect listeners from harmful language”. In fact many people will never employ words of this type and most others will only use them in a restricted set of situations. This simply implies that there are inhibitions about the normal use of items of this kind. The same idea is argued by Jay (ibid) when he says: “Obscenity has to do with the way that society has chosen that its government prohibits and controls the content of books and audio and video broadcasts to protect the audience”.

## **Vulgar Language**

Traditionally, the word “vulgar” means not polite, neither elegant, nor well behaved. Yet, vulgar language or language of the streets is employed to debase or devalue the thing or the individual referred to or described. These expressions which are regarded as insensitive and distasteful depend generally on context, Jay (ibid: 20) clarifies the above idea when he says “some communities may produce more vulgarities than others, depending on prevailing social, intellectual, and economic conditions and values operating in the community”. This implies that the use of vulgar terms depends on the culture of a given speech community including its conventions, intellectual and economic status.

## **Insult**

Insult is another category of taboo which exists in many forms across cultures and languages. At large, insult is considered as degrading, offensive and reprehensible, because it always expresses the opposite of someone’s value especially when it is intentional. Jay (ibid: 22) says in this respect that “such words are spoken with intent to harm, demean, or denigrate the listener”. So, the main purpose of insulting is to infringe one’s self esteem since it is used particularly to criticize the personal competence of the addressee. Basically, transgression of the rituals of interaction and desecration of the language are two basic features of insult. These two aspects

consequently lead the speaker to go beyond the law. Which law do we mean here? Definitely, the one of the correct language which is learned by every child through his parents and teachers.

### **Name-Calling/Prejudices**

Name-calling, unkind nicknames or prejudices are attributions designed to hurt the others and to arouse their anger. Children often use words of this type like 'stupid', 'idiot'...etc., when addressing their siblings or friends. Parents also find themselves using similar words to address their children or neighbours. Nevertheless, this phenomenon unfortunately possesses the potential to affect the individual development of any child because it produces both psychological and cultural effects. Besides, prejudice can take many forms. In the same line of thought Crystal, (1987:60) notes:

The subject matter ranges from subtle forms of intellectual sarcasm and humor to the crudest possible attacks on a person's courage...At one level, attacks may be subtle and indirect, involving allusion and figurative speech; at another, there may be explicit taunts, boast, name-calling, and jokes at the other's expense.

Brown (1995:8) defines prejudice as follows:

Prejudice is the holding of derogatory social attitudes or cognitive beliefs, the expression of negative affect, or the display of hostile or discriminatory behaviour towards members of a group on account of their membership of that group.

Nevertheless, the value of name-calling and verbal aggression on personal or social level is debatable. According to Hughlings (1958) (quoted in Dovidio et al, 2005:313) "the use of verbal insults is better than the use of physical assaults".

Apparently, the home's environment plays a tremendous role to make this phenomenon spread more. When parents use prejudices without consciously intending to, children try to imitate them in order to be like their parents or like their older siblings. Even psychologists believe that what we have become and how we behave at present largely depend on how we were brought up by our parents and on how our siblings influenced us. In short, our family life has a direct effect on our personality.

This idea leads us to wonder how these words can be judged as taboo or simply how they acquire their taboo status. Definitely, no one is born with knowledge of taboo words including all the categories mentioned above. "It is only through the socialization of speech practices that an oral and folk knowledge of swearing etiquette is created" Jay (2009: 154).

This socialization of speech practices is therefore, a means through which the child makes acquaintances with many types of words, among them taboo terms and enables him to learn when and with whom it is suitable to use or to avoid them. This idea is supported by Kasper (1990:193) in the following "young children and 'non-native speakers require time and experience to attain an adult native speaker's knowledge of what is offensive or rude".

## Euphemism

The word euphemism comes from the Greek word *euphemo*, meaning "auspicious /good/ /fortunate speech/ kind". *Ephemo* itself is derived from the Greek root-words *eu*, it means "good/well" + *phemo* "speech/speaking".

Euphemism is the use of other words or a phrase instead of the words required in an embarrassing situation. That is; people do not say directly what they mean exactly due to politeness. Williams, (1975:198) says that:

Euphemism refers to a kind of linguistic elevation or amelioration specifically directed towards finding socially acceptable words for concepts that many people cannot easily speak of.

In fact, people adjust their speech when they talk about topics which are shameful and sensitive, for instance, when a person refers to a period of prison which one of his relatives had spent, or when he mentions the names of certain occupations that have a rather humble status in our society such as garbage collectors, he moves immediately to euphemistic strategies. Hence, euphemism cannot flee the fact of being an alternative to taboo. Neaman and Silver (1990) say in this respect "euphemism is a way to substitute an inoffensive or pleasant word for more explicit, offensive one, thereby veneering the truth by using polite words". So, when someone decides to use an expression as a euphemism for the sake of hiding unpleasant or disturbing ideas, it often becomes a metaphor whose literal meaning is dropped. Yet, sometimes, people, particularly among older generations, employ proverbs that are often used metaphorically in order to replace harsh terms. Consequently, understanding their metaphorical nature enables us to unravel their real meanings.

## Proverbs

Proverbs or communication quotes are popular sayings which contain advice about how to act and live. Most proverbs have their origins in oral tradition; they involve encoding and intended messages which serve as a repository of people's wisdom and folklore.

It is obvious however that although few people use this kind of linguistic utterances, we cannot deny their crucial role in carrying messages to guide and influence people and their ability to preserve the ancient vocabulary. Indeed, this kind of saying includes the values and beliefs of a society. These values and beliefs are in effect deemed essential in life because they have a direct correlation to our needs as they shape our manner of thinking and responding to any circumstances we face.

Moreover, our acts are guided or done relying on our values, since they justify our actions and permit us to make the right choice and decisions and also to treat people adequately without using prejudices for example. Mele (2007:246) says in this respect:

Proverbs and some figurative expressions are intrinsically related to culture and reflect and safeguard a society's way of life...the proverb is valuable as it incorporates materials, social and

ideological features of culture such as...values, beliefs and morals which are coded (linguistically) and passed down as tradition. Accordingly, proverbs reflect not only cultural values and uniqueness but also commonalities shared across the society. In a nutshell, they reveal ways of seeing life.

These were the most important categories used either directly or euphemistically to insult and demean the others. So, in order to have a clear idea about how they are used in society, we have approached three levels of analysis mainly anthropology, pragmatics and sociolinguistics.

## METHODS

We classified our sample population into four sub-categories. 93 informants were given a questionnaire, but 17 individuals stopped at the first question because they answered by no, or never. So, we shall deal only with 76 participants.

Age	Females	Males	Total
18-25	25	8	33
26-35	8	16	24
35-45	12	04	16
Above 46	/	3	3
Total	45	31	76

Table 3.1: Participant' categories

As it is shown in the previous table, we opted for random sampling. Thus, the type of speakers to be studied is identified in advance. Furthermore, the above table demonstrates that informants of different ages are covered in order to have equilibrium in the sample population of Tlemcen. First we have relied on a quantitative analysis of data collected through a structured questionnaire as a means to reach a large number of people more easily. Second, a semi-structured interview has been included to interpret and compliment the result of the questionnaire. Observation and recording conversations have also been helpful tools which enable us to collect proverbs needed for our investigation.

The questionnaire which we have used consists of closed questions and semi -closed (structured questionnaire), in addition to open-ended questions where the participants could write free responses (semi-structured questionnaires). As far as the former is concerned, participants are limited by the suggestions given to them in advance. The latter however, includes only questions without any suggested answers.

We have chosen the semi-structured interview which is frequently used in qualitative analysis. According to Gray (2004: 214) there are many reasons which lead us to use interviews for collecting data and using it as a research instrument. She has given the following reasons:

- There is a need to attain highly personalized data.
- There are opportunities required for probing.
- A good return rate is important.
- Respondents are not fluent in the native language of the country, or where they have difficulties with written language.

Participant observation is the third data collection instrument used in our research in order to collect proverbs or popular sayings which can support our work.

### Analysis of the Data and Presentation of the Results

1- Do you use nicknames to call people?

- a- yes
- b- Sometimes
- c- Rarely
- d- No

e- Suggestions	Females	Males	Total
a	29	16	45
b	15	12	27
c	1	3	4
d	5	12	17
Total	93		

Table3.3: Use of Nicknames

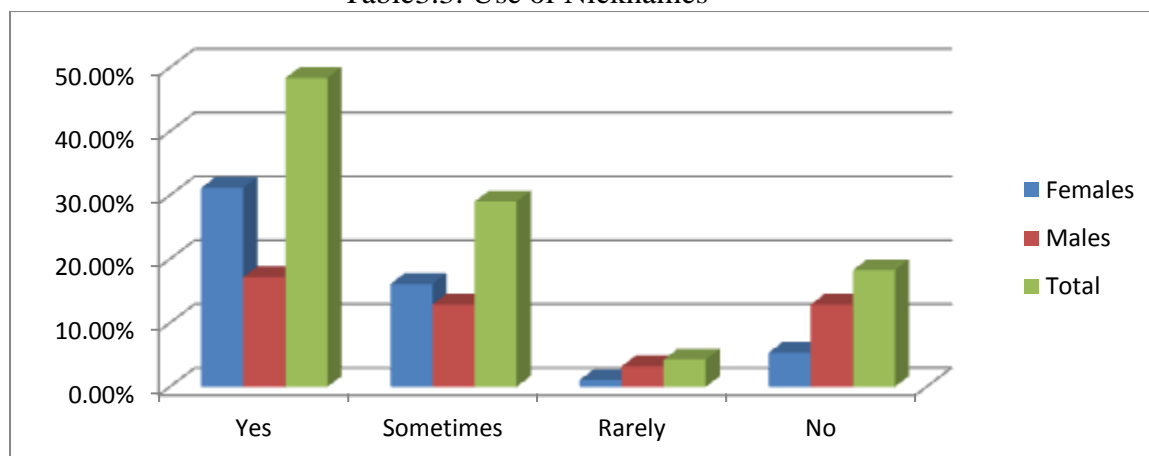


Figure 3.1: Use of Nicknames

As demonstrated in the table and the graph above, the majority of informants (48.38%) both females and males use name-calling daily and (29.02%) sometimes. The other participants who represent only (18.27%) answer that they do not use names to refer to people. Thus, at this level the 17 participants stopped answering the questions of the questionnaire since their responses were simply 'no' and the following questions focused on the terms which are very much employed by them within their society. Finally, we counted only (4.29%) of the informants who answered that they rarely use nicknames.



The results also show that people from different ages and statuses use name calling. One should mention that the presence of this habit is due to the way people raise their children, because home and school are considered as two major settings that participate in the child's education. As a matter of fact, the socialization of speech practices is the vehicle through which a child starts to acquire knowledge and experiences about what is acceptable to do or to say and what is not. Additionally, the child begins to uncover the sacred/profane world when he transgresses the rules and the conventions of his culture.

Nevertheless, it is plain that this bad phenomenon pervades our society where we remark that people use it either unconsciously or premeditatedly without taking into account religion that extremely forbids it, neither the harm which it may result in. Religion teaches us which principles are right and which are wrong, as it emphasizes the unity of its people. So, the person who uses any of threatening acts, insulting words or bad behaviour conducts himself to stir hatred only, as he risks to be rejected by his entourage.

2- What are according to you the aims of using name calling to insult others?

- a- To underestimate people
- b- Demoralize them
- c- To get on people's nerves.

Suggestions	Females	Males	Total
a	23	5	28
b	9	4	13
c	13	22	35
Total	76		

Table.3.4: Aims of using bad names

Generally speaking, people use bad names and insults for reasons such as hurting others, given that they leave a long-lasting mark on the individual as they lead the person to doubt his own worth. In fact, insults can be either verbal, negative stereotypes or bad labels, as they include behaviours that are perceived as humiliation, rudeness or offense. They play on the person's vulnerabilities as they cause powerful emotions, since they generate strong feelings of resentment and they are able to unleash anger.

The above table demonstrates that (36.84%) of the participants see that nicknames aim at underestimating the addressee. (17.10%) said that names of this kind are usually used to demoralize the listener. Finally, (46.05%) answered the last suggestion, seeing that the aim of such linguistic behaviour is to get on somebody's nerves or to try to annoy him/her. So we deduce from the subjects' answers that each one has experienced an embarrassing situation. The results are also presented in the following graph, where we counted the percentage of both genders separately:



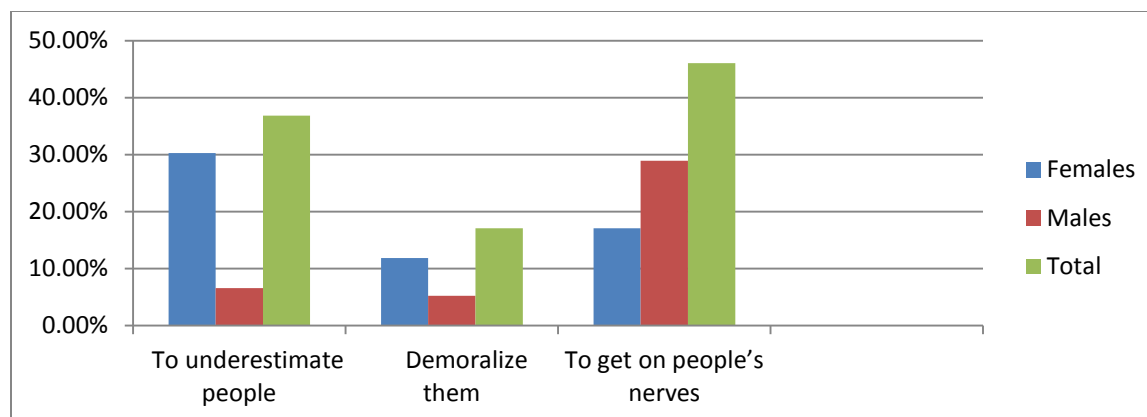


Figure 3.2: Aims of using bad name

The informants have three choices in order to identify the major aim of using nicknames. However, with regard to their answers we see that self-esteem, dignity, and the person's personality which includes various habits are targeted (see section 1.9). At this point, being called names cannot only damage the addressee but leave him/her believing that he or she is damaged, worthless, and useless, bad and defective. In addition, the person who is frequently named tends to act in ways that are consistent with that poor self-image and degrading treatment.

## Findings of the interview and participant observation

### 1. Do you remember bad names assigned to you?

11 informants were given the questionnaire and were interviewed at the same time. In fact only 7 interviewees answered the first question seriously. They said that nobody can forget bad labels, especially those received during their childhood, because of their fragility and lack of experience. Moreover, children cannot defend themselves either physically or by using speech. Children who are frequently insulted by their siblings often remember the experience with pain even in adulthood. One participant (9.09%) among them said that he cannot forget bad names employed to call him. He added that they are etched on his memory because of the strong impression they left on him. However, the other 4 informants (36, 36%) were laughing all the time and didn't take the matter seriously, so, their answers were fluctuating; sometimes they said 'yes' and sometimes 'no'.

And when we ask them about their perceptions of insults or name calling nowadays as adults, they said that name-calling were difficult to deal with when they were young, but today they accept them without any reactions, except those that are related to the honour of the family and to their dignity. Given that men and women may receive different types of teasing. Men for example, do not support the comments about their weaknesses or observations questioning their manhood, and women hate hearing people making fun of their physical appearance and hurtful comments.

So, we have noticed that the majority of them memorize negative labels because of the harm they cause.

## 2. Can you mention these names?

Another informant accepted to answer us, so they became eight or (72.72%) and the others retired completely after they had given us the questionnaires. The answers are as follows:

P1- /smina/or/ bota/ meaning successively 'fat' and 'a barrel' these two nicknames are used to mock at his weight.

P2. /jdada/ which means 'chicken' because of his white skin

Finally we have previously stressed the importance of proverbs in the representation of a culture and that they can be used euphemistically to harm people or more precisely to make them correct their wrong behaviour. Here are some famous proverbs used in Tlemcen speech community collected through a participant observation.

- /l'khir mra w char mra / means that well done things are woman made and nastily done things are woman made; this is used to tell the woman that if she wants to improve her way of life or to raise her children adequately or whatever, everything depends on her way of conducting her life.
- /lamra l'beta dima mréta/ meaning that the white woman or the beautiful one is always ill, this proverb is used to criticize the woman who is lazy and proud of her beauty.

## CONCLUSION

This study is not a mere description of categories of taboo in our society, but it provides some insights about the socio-cultural fabric of the speech community of Tlemcen as it reveals a set of Tlemcen customs and beliefs. Obviously, there are many similarities of the major categories of taboos across cultures but as the study shows, taboo lexical can also highlight the uniqueness or the difference of certain culture conventions, for instance, we may find people who grew up in the same region, but they speak and behave differently. In other words, many terms which are considered taboo in one culture, may be neutral in another and foreign people realize the existence of the rules associated with taboos only after they have broken them. Consequently, people who do not respect these rules may face total embarrassment, or other serious outcomes. Islam however, can be a good reference to us since it provides us with right views about our values and beliefs. Indeed insulting is considered as the speech act which is directly related to impoliteness and rudeness. We assume that this kind of knowledge is acquired early in childhood. Insults and name-calling are common social interactions, and can also be used in a playful manner with friends and between parents and children. However, it is the harm that insulting and name-calling cause that may discourage people, particularly; children who often start to hate school attendance due to this bad habit which erodes their feelings and self-confidence.

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