

Jelena V. Šajinović Novaković  
Univerzitet u Banjoj Luci  
Filološki fakultet  
Katedra za anglistiku

Milica R. Mijatović  
Univerzitet u Banjoj Luci  
Filološki fakultet  
Katedra za romanistiku

Milica Đ. Jošić Milinović  
Univerzitet u Banjoj Luci  
Filološki fakultet  
Katedra za anglistiku

## TABOO TALK: LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE AND SHIFTING BOUNDARIES OF SOCIAL DISCOURSE

*Abstract: Due to the influence of the mass media and social media which have brought changes in social norms and behaviours people are more than ever free to speak their minds without being censored under the cloak of anonymity, and hidden behind different platforms. This freedom of speech has encouraged them to speak and act the way they would never speak and act otherwise but has it affected the choice of topics they are comfortable to talk about? Are there taboo topics anymore, either cultural or personal? In language, a taboo is associated with things that are not said because of the embarrassment they cause. This paper aims to explore topics young people, college students, from three different societies find embarrassing to talk about with other people and particularly with their parents. They were given a set of questions considered taboo or controversial related to love or sex matters, physical appearance, money, political attitudes, health issues, problems with the law, and similar, and asked to specify who has the right to ask them the given question. They were also asked to tick the topics they find (un)comfortable to talk about in front of their parents, including swearing, and to provide a question they find deeply offensive.*

*Keywords: taboo topics, freedom of speech, communicative competence, social norms.*

## 1. Introduction

Studies have proved that we are all born with different competences, the most important of which is the ability to select language forms that appropriately reflect the social norms governing behaviour in specific encounters. The term was suggested by Hymes (1972) and includes knowledge and expectation of communication patterns like who may or may not speak in certain settings, what to speak about, and which topics to avoid. Most of us choose our words carefully according to whom we are talking. We also choose the topic of conversation with respect to our interlocutors. There are topics that are not appropriate to discuss around certain people, especially those in positions of authority or family members. However, some people feel more comfortable to talk about personal things in front of strangers than family members and close friends. Why is that so is more a matter of social psychology than sociolinguistics. Society and culture impose restrictions on certain behaviours and activities deeming them acceptable or unacceptable in different contexts. Influenced by societal expectations and restrictions, it seems we have different faces for different social contexts.

In his essay *The Critic as Artist* (1891) Oscar Wilde said that 'Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth'. Paradoxically, people are more likely to show their real faces when they can hide behind something and when they are not directly exposed to judgements. The mask helps them express their true thoughts and desires putting them at the same time on a safe side. The mask frees them from social constraints, hides their true identity, and grants them the freedom to speak and act in ways they would never speak or act. Even though made in the XIX century, quotes of Oscar Wilde are still applicable to today's society. But masks have changed: false profiles, anonymity, and trolls on the Internet which give people more freedom, and provide them with the option to present themselves in a better light or to give awful comments on other people and say things that wouldn't dare say in real life. We are witnessing a shift in the global perspective on life, one that brings forward issues once considered taboo, challenging long-held norms and sparking new conversations.

A taboo, by definition, refers to that which lies outside the boundaries of what society deems acceptable. Taboo words and expressions are considered taboo primarily because society deemed them as such (Darrah, 2022:p.53). Sex is a natural behaviour in humans, and sex-related issues have always been taboo and subject to social condemnation (Crespo-Fernandez, 2018: p.14). Most people would not discuss sex-related topics freely and publicly but they would discuss it with their

partners and friends which might imply that taboo is a taboo due to situational factors as Feldman et al. (2017) pointed out. However, the taboo surrounding sex is not only the consequence of social impositions but it is also self-imposed by individuals (Crespo-Fernandez, 2018:p.14). Ordinary people 'act as self-appointed censors and take it upon themselves to condemn those words and constructions that they feel do not measure up to the standards they perceive they should say' (Burridge, 2010:p.3). Sex is, for many, a reminder of the human's animalistic roots and base passions that should be kept private (Crespo-Fernandez, 2018:p.14-15). Some other topics also evoke feelings of embarrassment. Talking about finances can make people feel embarrassed especially if they are in a less favourable financial position. In many cultures, people are raised to believe that finances are a private matter and should not be talked about openly. Politics is an appealing topic but any political disagreement can lead to fervent debates that may cause embarrassment and bad blood between people. Another similar topic is religion. What we believe is also a very personal matter. People may feel embarrassed to talk about it, especially in multireligious societies where the topic can cause heated arguments between interlocutors.

Therefore, in many cultures, politics, sex, religion, and money issues are taboo topics and should be avoided. Wardhaugh (2010:p.249) argues that tabooed subjects can vary widely: sex; death; excretion; bodily functions; religious matters; and politics. Subjects such as these were once off-limits for the mass media and were rarely discussed in public discourse. However, in the pursuit of maximising viewership, television, particularly reality TV programmes, has increasingly broadcast obscene, indecent, and profane content featuring explicit language and behaviour. Such content is also present in other media. The widespread influence of the media has impacted our beliefs and customs. More than ever we feel free to give our opinion and offer comments without the constraints of traditional censorship. Topics that were once considered taboo are gradually becoming more acceptable. This supports the thesis that taboos are not constant, but rather subject to change. As Allan and Burridge (2006:p.9) pointed out that 'there is no such thing as an absolute taboo. Nothing is taboo for all people, under all circumstances, for all time.' For example, linguistic taboos may be violated on occasion to draw attention to oneself, or to show contempt, or to be aggressive or provocative, or to mock authority – or, according to Freud, on occasion as a form of verbal seduction, e.g., 'talking dirty' (Wardhaugh, 2010:p.259).

There are cultural taboos, things considered normal in one society can be found odd in another, and personal taboos, the topics an individual is sensitive to. Freedom

of speech has loosened our tongues but has it affected the choice of topics we are comfortable to talk about. Are there still topics we avoid to talk about because we find them embarrassing? To explore that we gave a questionnaire to college students in three different societies: Canada, Poland, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. They were asked to fill in the questionnaire as honestly as they could stating the question they found embarrassing to talk about. They were also asked to mark the topics they would never talk about with their parents. Their answers are discussed in the section Results.

An online survey conducted in Canada in (2020) asked people to rank their level of comfort/discomfort when discussing a series of issues. The top four topics mentioned were politics (26%), relationship/sex talk (24%), money and religion (23%). Canadians were most comfortable talking about their health issues (with a taboo rating of just 12%).

On the other side of the world, in Poland, Barbara Klich-Kluczevska studying the relationship between family, taboo, and Communism argues that at the dawn of the new millennium, German Slavic Studies professor Michael Fleischer surveyed Poles on the presence of taboos in Polish culture (2021:p.31). The respondents were asked to grapple with questions about the things of which they could not speak, which were taboo. Research showed that everything could be openly discussed in contemporary Poland and that only two topics were unequivocally taboo - sex and religion. The questionnaire results show that 'speaking negatively about the Church' is 'a collectively grounded and sanctioned' taboo in Poland.

Somewhere in between, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, people are particularly sensitive to the issues of politics and personal things. The society and family in Bosnia are putting pressure on young people to marry and have children in their twenties or early thirties. Staying single is not a desirable status particularly not for a woman in this country.

In the time of Communism, people from former Yugoslavia including Bosnia and Herzegovina were not allowed to discuss the regime, they did not have political freedom and the right to freedom of religion. It was not allowed to be a believer or to go to church. Or to doubt the concept of brotherhood and unity. Movies containing sex scenes or violent scenes were strictly forbidden by politicians and politics.

But are there any traces of the things mentioned in nowadays Canadian, Polish, and Bosnian society? Has living in a global village affected people and made them think and feel alike?

## **2. Methods**

In order to collect information, we used a questionnaire as a research instrument. Respondents, i.e. students in three different countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina 63, Canada 58, and Poland 67) filled in the questionnaire without revealing their identity. They were given a set of questions considered taboo or controversial related to love/sex, physical appearance, money, political attitudes, health issues, problems with the law, and similar, and asked to specify who has the right to ask them the given question. The list of questions was taken by MacAndrew and Martinez (2001) and padded out. The last set of questions in the questionnaire relates to the topics they are comfortable to talk about in front of their parents including swearing. The respondents were also asked to provide a question they found offensive and uncomfortable to talk about.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

As the data from the questionnaire indicate, Canadian respondents are open about discussing topics such as their weight, sexual orientation, nationality, marital status, and religious matters, including cremation and belief in God. However, they consider it inappropriate to swear in the presence of superiors, such as bosses, teachers, or parents. Outside of these - contexts, swearing is not viewed as problematic, and anyone can be present when it occurs.

Canadian respondents generally avoid discussing specific medical conditions, as well as topics such as abortion, especially when combined with religious questions (mainly females). This contradicts the results of the survey we mentioned in the introductory part, where it is stated that Canadians were most comfortable talking about their health issues. It seems that young Canadians are not ready to talk about sensitive health and ethical issues like abortion or hereditary diseases. Males are reluctant to share the details of their sexual experiences or the political parties they support. Additionally, the unemployed tend to avoid answering questions like 'How's the job search going?' because such questions indirectly target their financial situation, employment history, or future job prospects, and may feel personal or stigmatising.

The topics the respondents of both sexes find embarrassing to discuss with their parents are sex matters like masturbation, sex toys, visiting porn sites, sexual fantasies, and dating multiple people.

Females are generally more comfortable talking about topics like financial struggles, visiting a therapist or psychiatrist, being bullied at college, and

experiencing sexual harassment. On the other hand, males find it embarrassing to discuss things like a partner's infidelity, being bullied at college, sexual harassment, or dating multiple people. Both groups also agree that swearing in front of parents is unacceptable.

None of the Polish respondents reported having issues with being asked about the price of their mobile phones, their nationality, religious beliefs, exams, gambling experiences, plastic surgeries, hygiene habits (such as shaving legs), or political preferences, unless the questions come from superiors. A large number of them have no problem with swearing in front of others, except for colleagues and grandparents, as they mentioned. According to the results, they are particularly sensitive to health-related questions, such as family history of impairments and sexually transmitted diseases, believing that only doctors have the right to ask such personal questions. However, based on various responses, some questions are still considered personal taboos, including topics like sexual harassment, political views, the number of sexual partners they've had, hygiene habits (shaving legs), and being a virgin. The topics respondents don't like to talk about at all are topics like getting married (females only), age (females and males), sex matters (both), weight (both), going to church (females), deceased pets (females), parents and exes (females), money (males), family relations (males) and sex change (males).

Both male and female respondents find topics related to sex - such as masturbation, sex toys, visiting porn sites, sexual fantasies, and dating multiple people - embarrassing to discuss with their parents. However, females are generally more open about discussing issues like failing exams, losing jobs, taking tranquilisers, facing financial problems, and visiting a therapist or psychiatrist. On the other hand, females also find it uncomfortable to talk about sexual harassment and dating multiple people with their parents. Males, in contrast, don't find it embarrassing to discuss arguments they've had with their partners. When it comes to swearing in front of their parents, both females and males consider it a matter of personal choice. Fifty percent of all respondents feel it is acceptable to swear in front of their parents.

Bosnian respondents do not mind being asked about topics such as the price of their mobile phones, drug and gambling experiences, nationality, religious beliefs, exams, weight, criminal record, marital status, or cosmetic procedures like lip and breast augmentation. A significant number of them also do not find it problematic to swear in front of others. However, based on a range of responses, from 'no one' to 'anyone,' certain topics are considered personal taboos, including discussions about sexual harassment, political views, the number of sexual partners they've had, and hygiene habits like shaving legs.

Respondents from Bosnia are generally uncomfortable talking about topics like marriage (females only), plans for having children (females only), the number of sexual partners they've had, age (females only), tattoos and their meanings (both males and females), piercings and the reasons for having them (both males and females), finances, poverty, prices, physical appearance (such as height for males only), and their progress in college (males only).

Both sexes find it embarrassing to discuss sex-related topics, such as masturbation, sex toys, visiting porn sites, sexual fantasies, and dating multiple people, with their parents. Females, in particular, are more open about discussing issues like failing exams, taking tranquilisers, facing financial problems, visiting a therapist or psychiatrist, being bullied at college, and experiencing sexual harassment.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In language, a taboo is associated with things that are not said because of the embarrassment they cause. Of course, there are always those who are prepared to break the taboos in an attempt to show their freedom from such social constraints or to expose the taboos as irrational and unjustified, as in certain movements for 'free speech' (Wardhaugh 2010:p.249). Certain topics like sexual intercourse or the number of partners are still regarded as very personal to talk about in all three societies. Issues with high affective content like sexual fantasies are reserved for partners and friends only whereas issues with referential content like contraception or impairments running in the family are reserved for professionals like doctors. Seventy-five percent of respondents said that anyone can be present when they swear showing in that way that swearing is no longer such a taboo as it used to be. The overall chart confirms that young people from different societies don't find swearing a significant issue, not even swearing in front of their parents. But swearing in front of their superiors or grandparents is not acceptable. Interestingly, all respondents consider the topic of dating multiple people inappropriate to discuss with their parents, which may suggest that such behaviour is viewed as morally unacceptable and could potentially tarnish their overall image. Discussing the price of something a person possesses is generally fine as long as it does not involve sharing sensitive financial details. According to the results, discussing sexual orientation is also fine if it is done respectfully.

People from all three societies are open about personal matters such as religion and nationality, and share a common discomfort around discussing sexual topics. In all three countries, gender differences influence what topics males and females are comfortable discussing. Women seem to be more open to discussing a range of

personal, emotional, and societal challenges including mental health financial issues, life challenges (like sexual harassment, or academic failure) and coping mechanisms (tranquilisers). Health-related issues are more sensitive in Poland and Canada, while Bosnia exhibits a more relaxed attitude toward some of these matters. Cultural factors also shape views on topics like marriage, sexual harassment, and political views, with Bosnian and Polish respondents considering these issues more taboo.

Even though the digital age has led to a more relaxed approach to language, young individuals either embrace it with open arms, or cling to their linguistic competence, finding certain language choices still inappropriate and offensive showing in that way that they are not ready to challenge the long-held boundaries of social discourse.

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## **Questionnaire questions**

Look at the topics below and please answer as honestly as you can. Decide who has the right to ask you these things. It may be a particular person, for example, a doctor, a priest, a police officer, a partner/lover, a teacher, or a friend. It might be anybody or it might be nobody. Write anyone, a particular person, or no one next to each topic.

Have you ever taken drugs?

Have you ever tried luck in gambling?

Have you been sexually harassed?

How much do you weigh?

How many people have you had sexual intercourse with?

How far would you go on the first date?

Are you planning to start a family?

Who did you vote for at the last election?

How much do you earn (income, scholarship, pocket money)?

Have you got a criminal record?

Are you single?

What is your sexual orientation (are you heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual)?

Are you still a virgin?

How much did you pay for that mobile?

What is your nationality?

Do you use contraceptives?

Do you believe in God?

Have you ever cheated on your partner?

Do you stalk your exes on social media?

What is your ultimate sexual fantasy?

How many exams do you still have to pass to finish your studies?

Would you like to be cremated?

Do you go to nude beaches?

Do you check your partner's phone?

Do you shave your legs?

Have you ever contracted a sexually transmitted disease?

Have you gone under the knife to improve your appearance (breast enlargement, penis enlargement, hair implant)?

Is there any physical or mental impairment running in your family?

Do you owe money to someone?

Who can be present when you use swear words?

**Do you find these topics embarrassing to talk about with your parents**

The Fight You Just Had with Your Significant Other

Your partner unfaithfulness

(Your) Losing job

(Your) Failing on exam

(Your) Sexual orientation

Tranquilisers you take

Contraception you use

Masturbation

Problems with law

The financial problem you face

Gambling problems you are in

Drinking problems you have

Drug problems you face

Visiting the shrink (a therapist; a psychiatrist)

Sex toys you like

Dating multiple people

Visiting porn sites

Experiencing bullying at school/university

Experiencing sexual harassment

Sexual fantasies you have

Is it OK to use swear words in front of your parents

Јелена В. Шајиновић Новаковић  
Универзитет у Бањој Луци  
Филолошки факултет  
Катедра за англистику

Милица Р. Мијатовић  
Универзитет у Бањој Луци  
Филолошки факултет  
Катедра за романистику

Милица Ђ. Јошић Милиновић  
Универзитет у Бањој Луци  
Филолошки факултет  
Катедра за англистику

## ТАБУ: ЛИНГВИСТИЧКА КОМПЕТЕНЦИЈА И ПОМЈЕРАЊЕ ГРАНИЦА У СОЦИЈАЛНОМ ДИСКУРСУ

### *Резиме*

Под утицајем масовних медија и друштвених мрежа долази до промјена у друштвеним нормама и понашању. Више него икада људи су слободни да кажу шта мисле без цензуре, скривени иза различитих друштвених платформи, под плаштом анонимности. Ова слобода подстакла нас је да говоримо и понашамо се онако како иначе никада не бисмо, али је утицала и на избор тема о којима разговарамо. Постоје ли још увијек теме које се сматрају табу темама, културолошким или личним? У језику табу је повезан са стварима о којима се не говори због срамоте или нелагоде коју изазивају. Циљ овог рада јесте да истражи теме о којима је младим људима, студентима из три различита друштва непријатно да разговарају са другим људима, а посебно са својим родитељима. Дат им је сет питања која се сматрају табу или контроверзним, а која се односе на љубав и секс, физички изглед, новац, политичке ставове, здравствене проблеме и слично, те је тражено да прецизирају ко има право да им поставља питања тог типа. Од испитаника се тражило да означе теме о којима им је (не)пријатно да говоре пред својим родитељима, укључујући псовке, те да напишу питање које сматрају крајње непријатним.

► **Кључне ријечи:** табу теме, слобода говора, комуникативна компетенција, друштвене норме.