

## Taboo words and language: an overview

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### 1.1 Taboo applies to behaviour

*Taboo* refers to a proscription of behaviour for a specifiable community of one or more persons at a specifiable time in specifiable contexts. (Allan and Burridge 2006: 11)

The *Oxford Handbook of Taboo Words and Language* is a book about taboo words and language, but as I hope to make clear in the course of this chapter, what is in fact tabooed is the use of those words and language in certain contexts; in short, the taboo applies to instances of language behaviour.

As originally recognized in the Pacific islands when first visited by Europeans, taboos prohibited certain people, particularly women, either permanently or temporarily, from certain actions, from contact with certain things and certain other people. A tabooed person was ostracized. The term *taboo* came to be used of similar customs elsewhere in the world, especially where taboos arose from respect for and fear of metaphysical powers; it was extended to political and social affairs and generalized to the interdiction of the use or practice of anything, especially an expression or topic considered offensive and therefore shunned or prohibited by social custom.

Where something physical or metaphysical is said to be tabooed, what is in fact tabooed is its interaction with an individual, with a specified group of persons or even with the whole community. In principle any kind of behaviour can be tabooed. For behaviour to be proscribed it must be perceived as in some way harmful to an individual or their community; but the degree of harm can fall anywhere on a scale from a breach of etiquette to out-and-out fatality.

In this book we are principally concerned with language behaviour. There are people who would like to erase from the English language obscene terms like *cunt* and slurs like *idiot* or *nigger*; less passionate people recognize after a few moments reflection that this is a wish impossible to grant. Such words are as much a part of English as all the other words in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (see Allan 2015, 2016b, 2018 for discussion). However, there is evidence that ‘swear words’ occupy a different brain location from other vocabulary; part of

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<sup>1</sup> To appear in Keith Allan (ed.) *Oxford Handbook of Taboo Words and Language*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. (In press, 2018.)

the evidence is that people said never to have uttered taboo language earlier in their lifetime sometimes, when senile dementia has set in, lose the ability to speak normally but do readily recall and utter taboo words (cf. Comings and Comings 1985, Van Lancker and Cummings 1999, Jay 2000, Chapter 7 of this volume). It is possible to taboo language behaviour in certain specified contexts; in fact it is often done. Some tabooed behaviours are prohibited by law; all are deprecated and lead to social if not legal sanction.

To engage in tabooed behaviour is to cause offence to others and so it is dysphemistic. The use of tabooed words to insult someone is dysphemistic. The use of swear words has a number of motivations, one of them is the auto-cathartic ‘letting off steam’ e.g. with expletives such as *Fuck!* or *Shit!*.<sup>2</sup> A standard way of trying to avoid giving offense is to substitute a euphemistic locution for such dysphemisms, e.g. *Fiddle-di-dee!* and *Sugar!*, which might be called euphemistic dysphemisms – though just plain euphemism seems acceptable. In many circumstances it is dysphemistic to refer to faecal matter as *shit*; a standard euphemism for it is *poo*. Or, to call a spade a spade, the orthophemism is *faecal matter* or *faeces*. Although the context of use affects such judgments, dysphemism is typically impolite because it is offensive; orthophemism (‘straight-talking’) is polite and so is euphemism (‘sweet-talking’). Typically, euphemism is more figurative and colloquial, orthophemism more literal and more formal. Sometimes euphemisms are flamboyant verbiage, as when a traffic bottleneck is described as a *localised capacity deficiency*. Where such jargon causes offence, these are dysphemistic euphemisms.

There can be sound reasons for mandating specific parts of our lives out of bounds. Rules against incest are eminently sensible from an evolutionary point of view. Communities remain healthier if human waste is kept at a distance. Many food prejudices have a rational origin. Avoidance-speech styles help prevent conflict in relationships that are potentially volatile. To an outsider many prohibitions are perplexing and seem silly. But they are among the common values that link the people of a community together. What one group values another scorns. So, shared taboos are a sign of social cohesion.

## **1.2 Origin of the term *taboo***

Taboos are proscriptions of behaviour arising out of social constraints on the individual’s behaviour where it is perceived to be a potential cause of discomfort, harm or injury. The English word *taboo* derives from the Tongan *tabu* which came to notice towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. According to Radcliffe-Brown:

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<sup>2</sup> This actually works, see Stephens, Atkins, and Kingston (2009).

In the languages of Polynesia the word means simply ‘to forbid’, ‘forbidden’, and can be applied to any sort of prohibition. A rule of etiquette, an order issued by a chief, an injunction to children not to meddle with the possessions of their elders, may all be expressed by the use of the word *tabu*. (Radcliffe-Brown 1939: 5f)

On his first voyage of 1768–1771 Captain James Cook was sent to Tahiti to observe the transit of the planet Venus across the Sun. In his logbook he wrote of the Tahitians that the women never upon any account eat with the men, but always by themselves. [...] They were often Asked the reason, but they never gave no other Answer, but that they did it because it was right. [...] It hath sometimes hapned that when a woman was alone in our company she would eat with us, but always took care that her own people should not know what she had donn, so that whatever may be the reasons for this custom, it certainly affects their outward manners more than their Principle. (Cook 1893: 91)

Assuming that the constraint against Tahitian women eating with men was a taboo on such behaviour (cf. Steiner 1967), it looks comparable to the constraint against using your fingers instead of cutlery when dining in a British restaurant. It is an example of a taboo on bad manners, one subject to the social sanction of severe disapproval – rather than putting the violator’s life in danger, as some taboos do. Alternatively, we can look at this taboo as the function of a kind of caste system in which women are a lower caste than men in a way not dissimilar from the caste difference based on race that operated in the south of the United States of America until the later 1960s such that it was acceptable for an African American to prepare food for whites, but not to share it at table with them. This is the same caste system which permitted white men to take blacks for mistresses but not marry them; a system found in Colonial Africa and under the British Raj in India.

Captain Cook does not name the proscription against Tahitian women eating with men as either *taboo* or by the equivalent Tahitian term *raa*. It is in the log of his third voyage, 1776–1779, that he first uses the term *tabu* in an entry for June 15, 1777 (Cook 1967: 129): ‘When dinner came on table not one of my guests would sit down or eat a bit of any thing that was there. Every one was *Tabu*, a word of very comprehensive meaning but in general signifies forbidden.’ And on June 20, 1777:

In this walk we met with about half a dozen Women in one place at supper, two of the Company were fed by the others, on our asking the reason, they said *Tabu Mattee*. On further enquiry, found that one of them had, two months before, washed the dead corps of a Chief, on which account she was not to handle Victuals for five Months, the other had done the same thing to another of inferior rank, and was under the same restriction but not for so long a time. (Cook 1967: 135)

In the entry for July 17, 1777, Cook wrote:

*Taboo* in general signifies forbidden. [...]

*Taboo* as I have before observed is a word of extensive signification; Human Sacrifices are called *Tangata Taboo*, and when any thing is forbid to be eaten, or made use of they say such a thing is *Taboo*; they say that if the King should happen to go into a house belonging to a subject, that house would be *Taboo* and never more be inhabited by the owner; so that when ever he travels there are houses for his reception. (Cook 1967: 176)

Also in the journal entry for July 1777, the Surgeon on the *Resolution*, William Anderson, wrote:

[*Taboo*] is the common expression when any thing is not to be touch'd, unless the transgressor will risque some very severe punishment as appears from the great apprehension they have of approaching any thing prohibited by it. In some cases it appears to resemble the Levitical law of purification, for we have seen several women who were not allow'd the use of their hands in eating but were fed by other people. On enquiring the reason of it at one time they said that one of the women had wash'd the dead body of the chief already mentioned who died at Tonga, and another who had assisted was in the same predicament, though then a month after the circumstance had happen'd. It also serves as a temporary law or edict of their chiefs, for sometimes certainly articles of food are laid under restriction, and there are other circumstances regulated in the same manner as trading &c when it is thought necessary to stop it. (Cook 1967: 948)

Cook and Anderson use *taboo/tabu* to describe the behaviour of Polynesians towards things that were not to be done, entered, seen, or touched. Such taboos are, in some form, almost universal. For instance, there are food taboos in most societies: many Hindus are vegetarian; pork is proscribed in Judaism and Islam; Jews fast at Passover and Muslims during Ramadan; meat is unacceptable on Fridays among some Roman Catholics. Today almost all human groups proscribe the eating of human flesh. Some used to allow the flesh of a defeated enemy to be eaten; a few, such as the Aztecs, used to eat human flesh as a religious ritual. Today, cannibalism is only excused as a survival mechanism such as when, after an air crash in the Andes in 1972, surviving members of the Uruguayan rugby team ate the dead in order to stay alive.

### **1.3 Fatal taboos**

From the early 19<sup>th</sup> century many people came to believe that so-called 'primitive peoples' fear a 'demonic' power within a tabooed object comparable with the dangerous power of a Polynesian chief or the Emperor of Japan or Satan himself. The effect on a person who comes into contact with a tabooed person or thing is severely detrimental (cf. Freud 1950: 21-24); such contact is at least inappropriate and often unlawful. This was the standard interpretation of the term *taboo* among anthropologists (though see Chapter 20, this volume). Margaret

Mead 1937, for instance, restricts the term *taboo* to ‘prohibition against participation in any situation of such inherent danger that the very act of participation will recoil upon the violator of the taboo.’ It is as if the tabooed object were like a radioactive fuel rod which will have dire effects on anyone who comes into direct contact with it unless they know how to protect themselves. ‘Cases are on record in which persons who had unwittingly broken a taboo actually died of terror on discovering their fatal error’ writes Frazer (1875: 17). To violate a taboo can lead to the *auto da fé* of the perpetrator. In old Hawai‘i a commoner who had sex with his sister was put to death. A woman who commits adultery can be stoned to death under Sharia law in Mauritania, Nigeria, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. In the USA, as at 1 February 2017, 1446 people had been executed for murder since 1976, four in the first month of 2017. According to the Bible, God told Moses ‘You shall not permit a sorceress to live’ (*Exodus* 22:18); implementing scripture, hundreds of heretics and witches were burned in Europe when Christianity had more political power than it does today. Although most taboo violations do not result in capital punishment, there are plenty of other sanctions on behaviour prohibited under the law – whether this is law as conceived and promulgated in a modern nation state, or traditional lore in 18<sup>th</sup> century Polynesia, or under the Spanish Inquisition (1478–1834). That which is illegal is *ipso facto* taboo – it is prohibited behaviour. But, as we have already seen there is more that falls under the heading of taboo.

Violation of linguistic taboos is only fatal when there is serious disparagement of a revered personage such as a monarch or tyrant, a god, or an ideology. Apostate Christians (heretics) were executed in medieval Europe, apostate Muslims may be put to death in some Islamic states today, namely Afghanistan, Iran, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritania, Nigeria, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen – though most of these do not in practice impose a death penalty.

#### **1.4 Uncleanliness taboos**

There are taboos in which notions of uncleanliness are the motivating factor. Many communities taboo physical contact with a menstruating woman, believing that it pollutes males in particular; so some Orthodox New York Jews will avoid public transport lest they sit where a menstruating woman has sat. Many places of worship in this world taboo menstruating women because they would defile holy sites (on the menstruation taboo in many cultures see Allan and Burrige 2006: 162-170, Agyekum 2002, Ernster 1975, Hays

1987, Joffe 1948).<sup>3</sup> The Balinese used to prefer one storey buildings so that unclean feet (and worse) would not pass above their heads; they still avoid walking under washing lines where garments that have been in contact with unclean parts of the body might pass over their heads. Many communities taboo contact with a corpse such that no-one who has touched the cadaver is permitted to handle food.

Linguistic taboos on death and disease and those on the body parts and effluvia associated with sex, micturition, and defecation are uncleanliness taboos. It is such taboos which motivate the plethora of taboo language expressions in English invoking sex organs and practices, and the body parts and effluvia of urination and defecation. Only certain terms can function as swearwords. For instance, learned words for sexual organs and effluvia generally do not (cf. *You faeces! Urine off!*) because they typically function as orthophemisms; but nor do certain mild obscenities and nursery terms – at least among adults (cf. *You willie! Wee-wee on you!*).

## 1.5 Turning the tables on taboo

There is an assumption that both accidental breach and deliberate defiance of a taboo will be followed by some kind of penalty to the offender, such as lack of success in hunting, fishing, or other business, and the sickness or the death of the offender or one of their relatives. In many communities, a person who meets with an accident or fails to achieve some goal will infer, as will others, that s/he has in some manner committed a breach of taboo.

Generally speaking we do have the power to avoid tabooed behaviour. When a breach can be ascribed to bad luck, there remains a suspicion that the perpetrator is somehow responsible for having previously sinned; note the negative presupposition of ‘Why is this person’s luck bad?’ One concludes that any violation of taboo, however innocently committed, risks condemnation. People who commit crimes under severe stress or aggravation can seek to ameliorate censure by pleading extreme provocation, diminished responsibility, or temporary insanity; but they do not escape reproach.

Those who violate a taboo can often purify themselves or be purified by confessing their sin and submitting to a ritual. The *Oxford English Dictionary* quotes from Cook’s *Voyage to the Pacific* ii. xi. (1785) I. 410: ‘When the *taboo* is incurred, by paying obeisance to a great

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<sup>3</sup> In 2017 Swedish artist Liv Strömquist’s almost lifesized sketches of women with bloodstained underpants at Slussen metro station in Stockholm have generated huge controversy, both positive and negative. See <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/nov/02/enjoy-menstruation-subway-stockholm-art-row-liv-stromquist>.

personage, it is thus easily washed off.’ Cook also notes that tabooed objects may cease to be tabooed:

I now went and examined several Baskets which had been brought in, a thing I was not allowed to do before because every thing was then *Tabu*, but the ceremony being over they became simply what they really were, viz. empty baskets. (July 9, 1777, Cook 1967: 153)

Hobley describes a Kikuyu ritual for legitimizing and purifying an incestuous relationship.

It sometimes happens, however, that a young man unwittingly marries a cousin; for instance, if a part of the family moves away to another locality a man might become acquainted with a girl and marry her before he discovered the relationship. In such a case the *thahu* [or *ngahu*, the result of the violation of the taboo] is removable, the elders take a sheep and place it on the woman’s shoulders, and it is then killed, the intestines are taken out and the elders solemnly sever them with a sharp splinter of wood [...] and they announce that they are cutting the clan “*kutinyarurira*,” by which they mean that they are severing the bond of blood relationship that exists between the pair. A medicine man then comes and purifies the couple. (Hobley 1910: 438)

Some Nguni societies of southern Africa practise *hlonipha* under which it is forbidden for a woman to use her father-in-law’s name or even to utter words containing the syllables of his name (above all in his presence); inadvertent violation of the taboo may be mitigated by spitting on the ground (see Herbert 1990: 460, 468). Christians confess their sins to a priest and are given absolution on behalf of God. According to Hughes (1987: 379) in the 1820s a convict seeking escape from the particularly vicious penal settlement at Macquarie Harbour in Tasmania stabbed a fellow convict in order to be hanged. Asked by the chaplain why he didn’t just commit suicide: ‘Oh,’ he replied, ‘the case is quite different. If I kill myself I shall immediately descend to the bottomless pit, but if I kill another I would be sent to Hobart Town and tried for my life; if found guilty, the parson would attend me, and then I would be sure of going to Heaven.’ This is comparable with the foolish but comforting belief of a radical Islamist suicide bomber that s/he is assured of direct entry to Paradise if s/he kills an infidel.

Within many minorities and oppressed groups a term of abuse used by outsiders is often reclaimed to wear as a badge of honour to mark identification with and camaraderie within the in-group. To this end many African Americans have adopted the term *nigger* (often respelled *nigga*, but it remains homophonous) to use to or about their fellows (Allan 2015, 2016b, 2017, Allan and Burrige 1991, 2006, Asim 2007, Croom 2013, Folb 1980, Kennedy 2000, 2003, McWhorter 2002, 2010, Rahman 2012, inter alios). The speaker identifies as a person who has attracted or might attract the slur *nigger*: in other words s/he trades on the

hurtful, contemptuous connotation and subverts it.<sup>4</sup> Many examples can be found, e.g. in films by Spike Lee and Quentin Tarantino. (1)–(3) are from ‘Pulp Fiction’ (1994).<sup>5</sup>

(1) JULES: I wouldn’t go so far as to call the brother fat. He’s got a weight problem. What’s the nigger gonna do, he’s Samoan. (Tarantino 1999: 18)

(2) ENGLISH DAVE [*a young black man from Baldwin Park*]: Vincent Vega, our man in Amsterdam. Jules Winnfield, our man in Inglewood. Git your asses on in here. (*Vincent and Jules, wearing hideous shorts and T-shirts, step inside.*) Goddam, nigger, what’s up with them clothes?

JULES: You don’t even want to know. (Tarantino 1999: 35–36)

(3) VINCENT: Alright, it was a miracle. Can we go now? (*Opens the door and leaves.*)

JULES (*to the dazed Marvin*): Let’s go nigger. [1:49:55] Come on. Shit. (*They hustle out the door.*)

In (1) Jules, who is black, is addressing a white guy (Vincent) while speaking of a shared acquaintance, Antwan, whom he had earlier described as ‘Half-black, half-Samoan’. Here Jules counts him as one of an in-group of black ‘brothers’. Secondly, Jules thinks well enough of Antwan to be kindly euphemistic about his size. So when he says ‘What’s the nigger gonna do, he’s Samoan’ he is using *nigger* as a colloquial descriptive that is in no way a slur. In (2) Jules himself is addressed as ‘nigger’ by a fellow African American (the epithet ‘English’ is unexplained); incidentally, Inglewood is a dominantly black neighbourhood. In (3), which is not in the published script, Jules addressing Marvin as ‘nigger’ is in the spirit of camaraderie, though this may be bolstered by the fact that Marvin is lower in the pecking order than Jules and also at that moment stupefied by the murder of three people he had befriended to spy on.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Where *nigger*<sub>1</sub> is a slur and *nigger*<sub>2</sub> expresses camaraderie, it is classic polysemy; one cannot say *Ordell is a nigger*<sub>1</sub> and so is *Beaumont* [*a nigger*<sub>2</sub>] because it violates the Q-principle of both Horn (1984), Levinson (2000); however, it is perfectly possible for one African American to say to another *That honkey called me a nigger*<sub>1</sub>, *nigger*<sub>2</sub>.

<sup>5</sup> The actors are: Samuel L. Jackson (Jules), Paul Calderón (English Dave), John Travolta (Vincent), Phil LaMarr (Marvin), Bruce Willis (Butch), Ving Rhames (Marsellus), Duane Whitaker (Maynard) in (4). One objection to Quentin Tarantino using *nigger* is that he is white and as such has no right or sanction to have the word *nigger* uttered by anyone; a number of African Americans explicitly refute this, see Allan (2015: 6).

<sup>6</sup> See Allan (2015) for an explanation of this point.



Quotes (1)–(3) illustrate what has many times been demonstrated: that *nigger* is not necessarily used as a slur. The same can usually be said of other potential slurring terms (see Allan 2016b). Lest it be thought that ‘Pulp Fiction’ has no such slurs, there are racist slurs against Asian and Jewish shopkeepers at Tarantino (1999: 10) and *nigger* is also used in that vein in (4), which is not in the published script. White hillbilly Maynard’s shop was invaded by two men fighting: Butch (white) has pinned Marsellus (black) to the floor of the pawnshop and is pointing Marsellus’ own .45 handgun in his face.

(4) MAYNARD [*pointing his shotgun*]: Toss the weapon. (*After a brief delay Butch throws the gun to his left.*) Take your foot off the nigger [1:33:2]. Put your hands behind your head. Approach the counter, right now. (*Maynard slugs Butch with the butt of his shotgun.*)

This occurs after Butch has deliberately driven a car into Marsellus and the latter has been shooting at him. Butch has sought shelter in the pawnshop and was followed in by Marsellus. A vicious fight ensued in which Butch floors Marsellus. Needless to say, Maynard is enraged by this violent invasion of his premises, so we cannot expect him to be courteous to either of them. He refers to the groggy Marsellus as ‘nigger’ and he slugs Butch with his shotgun. Under these circumstances the racial slur is not out of place from a dramatic point of view; whatever term was used to refer to Marsellus was going to be insulting and there are not a lot of choices that would pass the censor.

(5) is a wife reporting a series of slurs from her husband.

(5) [W]hen he called me a slut, cunt, worthless bitch, I slapped him at some point, then he followed me to the porch, where I’d gone to cry, to tell me how I spread my legs for anyone who walks by[. . .] This is not the first time he’s called me a slut/whore/cunt/bitch/etc. (<http://forums.thenest.com/discussion/12002898/husband-called-me-a-c-t-b-ch-sl-t>, September 2013)

In (5) *slut*, *cunt*, *bitch* and *whore* are slurs, as is the accusation that she spreads her legs for anyone. There’s a song by P!nk called ‘Slut like you’ in which a guy says he’s looking for a quick fuck and she responds ‘me too’ because ‘I’m a slut like you’ (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HjU0xAZbZkA>). This is playing with an apparent dysphemism, converting it into something closer to an orthophemism. There is a similar example of this in (6), which moves from dysphemism towards orthophemism in reclaiming the lemma *slut* on a similar basis to that for racist reclamations (see also Neal 2012).

(6) So we are proud to reclaim the word “slut” as a term of approval, even endearment. To us, a slut is a person of any gender who celebrates sexuality according to the radical

proposition that sex is nice and pleasure is good for you. Sluts may choose to have solo sex or to get cozy with the Fifth Fleet. They may be heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual, radical activists or peaceful suburbanites. (Easton and Hardy 2009: 4)

As with other terms I have been discussing, whether or not *slut* is a slur, and therefore a tabooed dysphemism, depends on the context of use.

*Cunt* is used orthophemistically (as well as dysphemistically) in academic essays such as this one. It may be used as an expression of bantering camaraderie – as can *silly*, *ass*, *idiot*, *bastard*, and *fucker*, cf. (7) or showing camaraderie and empathy in (8) – which is in the Leith dialect of Edinburgh (Scotland).

(7) DAVEEEE; crazy hockey cunt. Love him (Bugeja 2008)

wookee is a gem love that cunt (Bugeja 2008)

[laughs] you're a gross cunt [laughs] (Wellington Corpus of Spoken New Zealand English J 2)

(8) — Granty ... ye didnae hear? ... Coke looked straight at Lenny.

— Naw. Wha ...

— Deid. Potted heid.

— Yir jokin! Eh? Gies a fuckin brek ya cunt ...

— Gen up. Last night, likes.

— Whit the fuck happened ...

— Ticker. Boom. Coke snapped his fingers. — Dodgy hert, apparently. Nae cunt kent about it. Perr Granty wis workin wi Pete Gilleghan, oan the side likesay. It wis about five, n Granty wis helpin Pete tidy up, ready to shoot the craw n that likes, whin he jist hauds his chist n cowps ower. Gilly gits an ambulance, n they take the perr cunt tae the hospital, but he dies a couple of ooirs later. Perr Granty. Good cunt n aw. You play cairds wi the guy, eh?

— Eh ... aye ... one ay the nicest cunts ye could hope tae meet. That's gutted us, that hus. (Welsh 2001: 99f.)

A newspaper report of Phil Grant's fatal heart attack, even if equally sympathetic, would necessarily use very different language – as a matter of social appropriateness. Taboo is conditioned by context.

## 1.6 Exploiting taboo

Taboos are open to beneficial exploitation. A person's body is, unless they are a slave, sacrosanct. By tradition, a Māori chief's body is taboo. Once it was possible for a chief to claim land by saying that the land is his backbone – which makes invading it taboo. And he

could claim possession by saying things like *Those two canoes are my two thighs!* (Steiner 1967: 42f). The taboos on a chief could be utilized by their minions: ‘they gave the names of important chiefs to their pet animals and thus prevented others from killing them’ wrote Steiner (1967: 43). Samoans sometimes tabooed their plantation trees by placing certain signs close to them to warn off thieves (cf. Turner 1884: 185-187 cited in Steiner 1967: 44f.). One sign indicated that it would induce ulcerous sores; an afflicted thief could pay off the plantation owner who would supply a (supposed) remedy. Most dire was the death taboo, made by pouring some oil into a small calabash buried near the tree; a mound of white sand marked the taboo, which was said to be very effective in keeping thieves at bay in old Samoa.

The genital organs of humans are always subject to some sort of taboo; those of women are usually more strongly tabooed than those of men, partly for social and economic reasons, but ultimately because they are source of new human life. Few women today are aware of the supposed power of the exposed vulva (commonly referred to as ‘vagina’) to defeat evil. The great Greek mythical warrior Bellerophon, who tamed Pegasus and the Amazons and slew the dragon-like Chimaera, called on the sea-god Poseidon to inundate the Lycian city of Xanthos; he was defeated by the women of Xanthos raising their skirts, driving back the waves, and frightening Bellerophon’s horse Pegasus. Images of a woman exposing her vulva are found above doors and gateways in Europe, Indonesia, and South America; in many European countries such figures are also located in medieval castles and, surprisingly, many churches (see Allan and Burridge 2006: 8; Blackledge 2003: 9). The display of the tabooed body-part is a potent means of defeating evil.<sup>7</sup>

Linguistic exploitations of taboo are frequent in comedy. The British sitcom ‘Are You Being Served?’ (Jeremy Lloyd and David Croft 1972–1985) is celebrated for innuendo. The fifty-something year old battle-axe, Mrs Slocombe, made frequent reference to her ‘pussy’, as in (9)–(11).

- (9) Well, the central heating broke down. I had to light the oven and hold my pussy in front. (‘Mrs. Slocombe Expects’ 1977)
- (10) I’ve got to get home. If my pussy isn’t attended to by 8 o’clock, I shall be strokin’ it for the rest of the evening. (‘The Junior’ 1979)
- (11) Well, you know how clumsy those removal men are. I’m not havin’ ’em handlin’ my pussy. (‘The Apartment’ 1979)

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<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, singer Britney Spears had to pay out a large sum of money to her former bodyguard Fernando Flores in 2010 after she allegedly repeatedly ‘exposed her uncovered genitals’ to him.

See these and many more in ‘Mrs Slocombe’s Pussy’ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vRJIItzalJY>.

Shakespeare was the master of bawdy wit much more subtle than is found in ‘Are You Being Served?’. Witness (12) from *Much Ado About Nothing* V.ii.9ff; Margaret is a gentlewoman-in-waiting, Benedick is a gentleman.

- (12) MARGARET To have no man come over me! why, shall I always keep below stairs?  
BENEDICK Thy wit is as quick as the greyhound’s mouth, – it catches.  
MARGARET And yours as blunt as the fencer’s foils, which hit, but hurt not.  
BENEDICK A most manly wit, Margaret; it will not hurt a woman: and so, I pray thee, call Beatrice: I give thee the bucklers.  
MARGARET Give us the swords; we have bucklers of our own.  
BENEDICK If you use them, Margaret, you must put in pikes with a vice; and they are dangerous weapons for maids.

The images here include: (a) a man coming over a woman (suggesting sex play); (b) the woman keeping her private parts hidden (‘below stairs’); (c) womanhood as mouth; (d) a man’s foil which scores a hit but does not hurt (suggesting encounter with a tumescent penis); (e) a buckler is a small shield with a boss to ward off thrusts from daggers, swords, and pikes; a woman’s buckler is the boss of her mons veneris (‘mound of Venus’, note the metaphor in this term, described in a dictionary of 1693 as ‘the upper part of a Womans Secrets, something higher than the rest’); (f) a woman’s vagina between her open legs forms a vice (vise) in which to put the pike; (g) if swords and pikes are penises they are indeed dangerous to maidenhead.

The interchange in (12) is superficially innocent banter; but the figures evoke impassioned sexuality.

It behoves me to distinguish banter from insult (see Allan 2016a, Chapter 18, this volume). With insult the agent has the perlocutionary intention when making the utterance to assail the target with offensively dishonouring or contemptuous speech or action and/or to treat the target with scornful abuse or offensive disrespect. The utterance has the perlocutionary effect (perhaps realising the agent’s perlocutionary intention) of demeaning someone and/or of affronting or outraging them by manifest arrogance, scorn, contempt, or insolence. Banter, on the other hand, is a form of competitive verbal play and upmanship in circumstances where it is mutually understood that there is no serious attempt to wound or belittle the interlocutor: the agent needles a sparring partner with critical observations on their physical appearance, mental ability, character, behaviour, beliefs, and/or familial and social relations. Thus insult is

blatantly dysphemistic whereas banter is not, though because the locution is often superficially dysphemistic it might be branded as dysphemistic euphemism.

## 1.7 Swearing

Swearing is the strongly emotive use of taboo terms. There are four functions for swearing which often overlap: expletive, insult, solidarity/camaraderie, and vividness (cf. Allan and Burridge 2009).

- (i) the expletive function: ‘Oh sugar. We’ve burnt it’ (ICE-AUS S1A-058(A):284)
- (ii) abuse and insult: ‘Don’t phone me yet as I am having both my ears transplanted to my nuts so I can listen to you talk through your arse.’ (ACE S05 873) This also falls under (iv) below.

Both (i) and (ii) are exemplified in ‘What the fuck are youse doing here. My fuckin’ son had to get me out of bed. I can’t believe youse are here. What the fuck are youse doing here?’ (Police v Butler [2003] NSWLC 2 before Heilpern J, June 14, 2002)

- (iii) expression of social solidarity: ‘S1: pray to baby Jesus open up your heart let god’s love come pouring in let god’s love shine down on you like it has me and Miss Suzanne over here. / S2: oh fuck off (ICE-NZ S1A)
- (iv) stylistic choice – the marking of attitude to what is said: ‘How in the HELL do they think they can change it by sitting on their arses doing nothing?’ (WSC P). ‘Welfare, my arsehole’ (ACE F10 1953)

One aspect of the stylistic function is to use bad language to spice up what is being said: to make it more vivid and memorable than if orthophemism had been used. An example is former Prime Minister Paul Keating’s alleged description of Australia as ‘the arse end of the world’<sup>8</sup>. Another, not unrelated aspect, is to display an attitude of emotional intensity towards what is being said or referred to in the utterance. A possible combination of (iii) and (iv) is: ‘Yeah we’re hooking up with them in Adelaide we’ll swab the decks finger each other in the arses y’know all that sorta shit’ (AUSTGRAM ABCNAT7:[C7]).

Concatenated with nouns, adjectives, participles and verbs, swearwords like *bloody* and *fucking* emphasize the emotive often urgent attachment to the speaker’s speech act as in (13)–(19). In the initial brackets is a typical interpretation of the emotive force that might be provided by these expletives.

(13) [warning] It’s a bloody/fucking crocodile!

(14) [nothing to make a fuss about] It’s only a bloody/fucking picture!

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<sup>8</sup> Alleged by Prime Minister Bob Hawke in 1990.

- (15) [lamentation] You've bloody/fucking broken it!
- (16) [exasperation at question asked] But I'm going on bloody/fucking holiday!
- (17) [condemnation] You're driving too bloody/fucking fast!
- (18) [complaint, exasperation] This train is bloody/fucking late/slow.
- (19) [surprise] It's turned bloody/fucking red!

Skilled use of swearing demonstrates a great command of rhetoric, albeit one that cannot be employed in formal discourse.

Children of both sexes use swearwords from as young as one year old (see Chapter 6) and the practice continues into old age – even when other critical linguistic abilities have been lost. People with certain kinds of dementia and/or aphasia can curse profusely, producing what sound like exclamatory interjections as an emotional reaction. However, when called upon to repeat the performance, they are unable to do so because they have lost the capacity to construct ordinary language. The fact that dirty words, abusive words, and slurs pour forth in these particular mental disorders is only possible because they are stored separately (or at least accessed differently) from other language.<sup>9</sup>

## **1.8 Less dangerous taboos**

Infractions of taboos can be dangerous to the individual and to his or her society; they can lead to illness or death. But there are also milder kinds of taboo whose violation results in the lesser penalties of corporal punishment, incarceration, social ostracism, or mere disapproval. Humans are social creatures and every human being is a member of at least a gender, a family, a generation; usually they are also members of friendship, recreational, and occupational groups. An individual's behaviour is subject to sanction within these groups and by the larger community. Some groups, e.g. family and sports team supporters, have unwritten conventions governing behavioural standards; others have written regulations or laws. Groups with written regulations also have unwritten conventions governing appropriate behaviour. In all cases sanctions on behaviour arise from beliefs supposedly held in common by a consensus of members of the community or from an authoritative body within the group. Taboos normally arise out of social constraints on the individual's behaviour. They arise in cases where the individual's acts can cause discomfort, harm or injury to him- or herself and to others. The constraint on behaviour is imposed by someone or some physical or metaphysical force that the individual believes has some authority or power over them – the

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<sup>9</sup> Jay (2000) offers a comprehensive account of the mental disorders associated with coprolalia, copropraxia, and other coprophenomena. See also Chapters 6 and 7, in this volume.

law, the gods, the society in which one lives, even proprioceptions (as in the self-imposed proscription *Chocolates are taboo for me, they give me migraine*).

## 1.9 There is no such thing as an absolute taboo

Nothing is taboo for all people under all circumstances for all time. There is an endless list of behaviours ‘tabooed’ yet nonetheless practised at some time in (pre)history by people for whom they are presumably not taboo. This raises a philosophical question: if Sue recognizes the existence of a taboo against mariticide and then deliberately flouts it by murdering her husband, is mariticide not a taboo for Sue? Any answer to this is controversial; my position is that at the time the so-called taboo is flouted it does not function as a taboo for the perpetrator. This does not affect the status of mariticide as a taboo in the community of which Sue is a member, nor the status of mariticide as a taboo for Sue at other times in her life. Although a taboo can be accidentally breached without the violator putting aside the taboo, when the violation is deliberate, the taboo is not merely ineffectual but inoperative.

Quite commonly one community recognizes a taboo (e.g. late 18<sup>th</sup> century Tahitian women not eating with men) whereas another (Captain Cook’s men) does not. In 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe women from all social classes, among them King Charles I’s wife Henrietta Maria, commonly exposed one or both breasts in public as a display of youth and beauty. No European queen nor Prime Minister would do that today. Australian news services speak, write, and show pictures of a person recently dead, a practice which is taboo in many Australian Aboriginal communities. You may be squeamish about saying *fuck* when on a public stage, but lots of people are not. No place of worship today would be allowed to create a display of the vulva like that of the 12<sup>th</sup> century Église de Ste Radegonde (Poitiers, France). You may believe it taboo for an adult to have sex with a minor, but hundreds of thousands of people have not shared that taboo or else they have put it aside. Incest is tabooed in most communities, but Pharaoh Ramses II (fl. 1279–1213 BCE) married several of his daughters. Voltaire (1694–1778) had an affair with his widowed niece Mme Marie Louise Denis (née Mignot, 1712–1790), to whom he wrote passionately:

My child, I shall adore you until I’m in my grave. ... I would like to be the only one to have had the happiness of fucking you, and I now wish I had slept with no-one but you, and had never come but with you. I have a hard on as I write to you and I kiss a thousand times your beautiful breasts and beautiful arse. (Besterman 1957, Letter 4856 from Strasbourg September 3, 1753. My translation.)

In most jurisdictions it is taboo to marry a sibling, but some of the Pharaohs did it; so did the Hawai‘ian royal family. Killing people is taboo in most societies; though from time to time and in various places, human sacrifice has been practised, usually to propitiate gods or

natural forces that it is thought would otherwise harm the community. Killing enemies gets rewarded everywhere and judicial execution of traitors and murderers is still common. Some Islamists believe that blowing themselves up along with a few infidels leads to Paradise. The Christian God said to Moses ‘He that smiteth a man, so that he die, shall be surely put to death’ (Exodus 21: 12). Yet in the Bible we find human sacrifice approved in the murder of an Israelite and a Midianitish woman ‘so [that] the plague was stayed from the children of Israel’ (Numbers 25: 8). God persecuted the Midianites; he told Moses to ‘vex ... and smite them’ (Numbers 25: 17) ‘And [the Israelites] warred against the Midianites as the Lord commanded Moses; and they slew all the males’, burned their cities, and looted their cattle and chattels (Numbers 31: 7–11). Then Moses sent the Israelites back to complete the Lord’s work by killing all male children and women of child-bearing age, keeping other females ‘for yourselves’ (Numbers 31: 17–18). God’s work or not, this is military behaviour that would be tabooed today and might lead to a war crimes trial.

In Anglo communities (and those of many other cultures too) it is today tabooed for an adult to touch the sexual organs of another person without at least implicit permission to do so because in the least it is disrespectful, and at worst it is illegal assault. Many celebrities have been convicted of rape (Mike Tyson, Roman Polański), sexual harassment (Congressman Mark Foley, Rolf Harris), or child molestation (Gary Glitter, Michael Jackson). During 2016 it emerged that then presidential candidate Donald J. Trump (later 45<sup>th</sup> POTUS) had boasted on tape in 2005:

I did try and fuck her. She was married. [A few seconds later, of a different woman] I’ve gotta use some tic tacs, just in case I start kissing her. [...] You know I’m automatically attracted to beautiful — I just start kissing them. It’s like a magnet. Just kiss. I don’t even wait. [...] And when you’re a star they let you do it. [...] You can do anything. [...] Grab them by the pussy. [...] You can do anything.<sup>10</sup>

This very public violation of taboo was treated as a breach of etiquette that was never denied by Trump, who frequently self-contradicts and blatantly lies. Trump has been both pro-choice (1999) and pro-life (2015). He has said (February 13, 2016): ‘I do listen to people. I hire experts. I hire top, top people. And I do listen.’ But on March 16, 2016 he said: ‘I’m speaking with myself, number 1, because I have a very good brain and I’ve said a lot of things. ... My primary consultant is myself.’ On September 24, 2015 he boasted: ‘I don’t mind being criticized. I’ll never, ever complain.’ Yet on May 18, 2017 he did, childishly, complain: ‘Look at the way I have been treated lately. Especially by the media. No politician in history,

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<sup>10</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-recorded-having-extremely-lewd-conversation-about-women-in-2005/2016/10/07/3b9ce776-8cb4-11e6-bf8a-3d26847eed4\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-recorded-having-extremely-lewd-conversation-about-women-in-2005/2016/10/07/3b9ce776-8cb4-11e6-bf8a-3d26847eed4_story.html).



and I say this with great surety, has been treated worse or more unfairly.’ And then there is his claim that at his January 20, 2017 inauguration: ‘The audience was the biggest ever.’ However, aerial photos clearly show it was barely half the size of the audience at Obama’s inauguration in 2009.<sup>11</sup> It is accepted, i.e. not tabooed, that politicians regularly lie and frequently contradict themselves, but Donald J. Trump is in a class of his own.

We are forced to conclude that every taboo must be specified for a particular community of people for a specified context at a given place and time. There is no such thing as an absolute taboo that holds for all worlds, times, and contexts.

## 1.10 Censorship and censoring

Censorship is the suppression or prohibition of speech or writing that is condemned as subversive of the common good. The censoring of language is the proscription of language expressions that are taboo for the censor at a given time in contexts which are specified or specifiable because those proscribed language expressions are condemned for being subversive of the good of some specified, specifiable, or contextually identifiable community.

The problem lies in the interpretation of the phrase ‘subversive of the common good’. For instance, the censorship of incitement to (as well as actual) violence against any citizen supposedly guards against their physical harm. The censorship of profanity and blasphemy supposedly guards against their moral harm. In Tudor Britain, taking the Lord’s name in vain was frowned upon and eventually banned – which is mild retribution compared with what the Bible sanctions in Leviticus 24: 16: ‘he blasphemeth the name of the LORD, shall be put to death’. Elizabeth I is reputed to have favoured *God’s wounds* as an oath (Montagu 1968: 139). During her reign there arose euphemisms like *’sblood*  $\Rightarrow$  *’s’lood*  $\Rightarrow$  *’slud*,<sup>12</sup> *’sbody*, *’sfoot*, *’slid* [eyelid], *’slicht*, *’snails*, *’sprecious* [body], and *zounds* foreclipped of *God* and occasionally additionally remodeled, e.g. *God’s wounds*  $\Rightarrow$  *’swounds*  $\Rightarrow$  *zounds* pronounced /zu:nz/  $\Rightarrow$  *zaunds* pronounced /zaunz/. Henry Fielding’s *The History of Tom Jones* (Fielding 1749) omits letters to euphemize, e.g. ‘Z—ds and bl—d, sister’ (XVI.4) and contains ‘*Sbodlikins* (X.5) and *Odsbud!* (XVI.7) as variants of *God’s body*, along with *Odsooks!* (XII.7) and *Odzookers!* (XVIII.9) from *God’s hooks* (nailing Christ to the cross) and *Odrabbet it!* (XVI.2) or *Od rabbit it* (XVII.3, XVIII.9) from *God rot it!* (“confound it”)

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<sup>11</sup> See incontrovertible evidence at <https://twitter.com/realEricTyson/status/861122546875478016>.

<sup>12</sup> All three forms occur in Ben Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair* of 1614, cf. Jonson (1981). The sequence  $A \Rightarrow B$  symbolizes ‘A is the source of B, or B derives from A’; and  $C \Leftarrow D$  ‘D is the source for C, or C derives from D’.

which lives on in *drat it. I' fackins* (X.9) is a variant of *i' faith* and *Icod!* (XVIII.8) derives from either *in God's name* or *By God*.

How does remodelling work? (20) says something about misspellings, which one might look upon as accidental remodellings.

(20) Aoccdrnig to a rsecherear at an Elingsh uinervtisy, it deosn't mttar in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoetnt tihng is that frist and lsat ltteer is at the rghit pclae. The rset can be a toatl mses and you can sitll raed it wouthit porbelm. Tihs is bcuseae we do not raed ervey lteter by itslef but the wrod as a wlohe.

No fluent speaker of English has any trouble reading (20) – which explains the power of the designer label *FCUK* (French Connection UK). Taking context into account and working on a system of analysis-by-synthesis we match misspelled words with their normal forms.

Similarly with euphemisms like *Sugar!* and *Shivers!* substituted for *Shit!*, *fudge* and *frig* for *fuck*, *Gee!*, *Goodness!* or *Lordy!* for *God!*, and *Jeepers!* for *Jesus!*

Criticism of monarchs, heads of state and other persons of rank is often severely censored, particularly in times of national instability. On the face of it, language censorship – like the restriction on gun ownership – is a reasonable constraint against abuses of social interaction amongst human beings. However, history shows that censorship empowers people who are by inclination illiberal and unlikely to be artistically creative or broadly schooled. The judgment of a censor is open to error, fashion, whim, and corruption. Moreover, censorship fails to prevent people intent on flouting it; censorship is like whistling in the wind – not that such infelicity has ever stopped the imposition of censorship.

There is another argument against censorship: as Publius Cornelius Tacitus (56–120 CE) pointed out (*The Annals* Book XIV: 50, Tacitus 1908: 444), banned writings are eagerly sought and read; once the proscription is dropped, interest in them wanes. Censorship nearly always has such confounding effects. The prohibition on the manufacture and sale of alcohol in the United States 1920–1933 was notoriously ineffective and counterproductive in that it led to the establishment of organized crime syndicates. The experience has had little effect on today's law-makers, who insist on banning recreational drugs with similar results. Attempts by Senator Jesse Helms and others to ban a 1988 retrospective of photographer Robert Mapplethorpe's work led to its universal notoriety and a ten-fold increase in prices.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>. Robert Mapplethorpe's photos of gays, fisting, sado-masochism, a man pissing into another's mouth, himself dressed as Satan with a bull-whip in his arse for a tail, and the fact that he was to die of AIDS led to a notoriety that increased his saleability. See Hughes (1993: 163).

## 1.11 Language change and development

The avoidance of linguistic taboos can cause language change and give rise to linguistic creativity as revealed by remodelling, especially as a source for euphemisms and as a function of verbal play. There are predominantly two ways in which novel terms and expressions are created leading to language change: formally through remodelling and semantically through figurative language. Consider some of the words for nakedness. There is the orthophemistic term *nude*, from Latin *nudus*, often used of photographic or painted representations of naked women and, much more rarely, of a naked man – hence the marked term *male nude*. Whether *a nude* is artistic or pornographic depends on viewer belief. A colloquial Australian euphemism for being *in the nude* is *in the nuddie*. Other euphemisms include *as nature intended*, *in one's birthday suit*, *in the altogether*, and *in the buff* ( $\Leftarrow$  *buff[alo] leather*, *buff skin* transferred to humans). Being naked is captured by the dysphemism *bare-arsed* and the more euphemistic *butt / buck naked* in which *buck*  $\Leftarrow$  *butt*. The orthophemistic term *stark naked* and the connected colloquial euphemism *starkers* also arose by replacing a final /t/ with a /k/: *stark*  $\Leftarrow$  *start* “tail, arse”. *Nudists* like to go about in the open air without clothes on and, being *as nature intended* when in natural surroundings, they are euphemistically called *naturists*.

Such expressions display folk-culture in a remarkable inventiveness of metaphor and figurative language sourced in the perceived characteristics of whatever is being talked about. For instance, terms for tabooed objects and events provide ready-made material for the dysphemistic language of curses, insults, epithets, and expletives. X-phemisms, i.e. orthophemisms and/or euphemisms and/or dysphemisms, are motivated by a speaker/writer's want to be seen to take a certain stance by upgrading, downgrading, obfuscating, and deceiving; and they extensively manifest indulgence in verbal play. Although the discussion here focuses on English, the categories illustrated occur across the world's languages, and many of them are significant for the study of language change.

X-phemism motivates language change by promoting new expressions, or new meanings for old expressions, and causing some existing vocabulary to be abandoned. Consider avoidance expressions for profane use of the expletive *God!*: *Cor! Cor lumme! Golly! Gosh! Gorblimey! Gordonbennet! Gordon'ighlanders! Goodness (knows)! (Good) gracious! For goodness' sake!* Such remodellings of the word *god* are deliberate ploys to avoid explicit profanity (i.e. careless irreverence for the deity or other religious icon). This avoidance displays a certain stance: an altruistic desire not to offend and/or the face-saving aspiration not to seem to be offensive.

Chaucer's Canon's Yeoman uses 'Marie' for Mary, mother of God (Chaucer 1396 l. 1062); *Marie* was later remodelled to *Marry* as in *Marry forbid!* and *Marry come up!*. Rather similar in meaning to the expostulatory *Marry!* were *Fie!* and *Fackins!* remodelled from *Faith!* all of them having much the same force as today's profane *God!*. These are more archaic than *Holy Mary!* and *Holy mother!* whence, probably, *Holy cow!* and the double dysphemisms *Holy shit!* *Holy fuck!*. Less profane than *Holy Mary!* are *Holy Moses!* *Holy mackerel!* *What in Hades?!* is perhaps polite variation on *What in hell?!* Curiously, although *What the deuce?!* is analogous to *What the dickens?!* and *What the devil?!*, 'deuce' here derives from the Norman French oath *Deus!* "God". *What the dickens?!* avoids calling up by name the malevolent spirit of *Old Nick*, *Old Harry*, *Old Bendy*, *Old Bogey*, *Old Poker*, *Old Roger*, *Old Split-Foot*, *the Old Gentleman*, *Old Billy*. Confounding someone or something was euphemized in *Od rabbit it* from *God rot it!* – which lives on in *Drat it!* or simply *Drat!*. There was always the explicit *Damnation!* remodelled to *Tarnation!* as *Damn!* is remodelled to *Darn!* and *Dang!*

There are similar processes for other taboo terms, e.g. *cunt* is reformed into *cooch*, *coochie*, *hoochie-coochie* and *oochamagoochi*. *Cunny* "cunt", retained in modern *cunnilingus*, derives from Latin *cunnus*, probably originally a euphemism. There may also have been some input from French *con*, itself derived from Latin *cunnus* and used for the bawdy-part from (at least) the 14<sup>th</sup> century (cf. Boch and Wartburg 1975, Picoche 1979), and perhaps from Spanish *coño*, too. *Coney* /kʌni, kouni/ was the word for "rabbit" until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when it dropped out of use because of the taboo homonym. In Latin, rabbit is *cuniculus*, and its burrow *cuniculum*; end-clip either and you are left with *cuni[e]* (spelled variously as *coney*, *cony*, *conny*, *conye*, *conie*, *connie*, *conni*, *cuny*, *cunny*, *cunnie*<sup>14</sup>). One of the many euphemisms for *cunt* was *cunny-burrow*, hence the picturesque term for a penis as the *cunny-burrow ferret* (Farmer and Henley 1890-1904). There is a long-time link between rabbits, bunnies, and cunts. On the same topic, *well*, *bottle* and *pond* all mix configuration with function and/or effluvia in their imagery. The vulva is seen as a *mouth*, with lips and tongue (clitoris) – hence, *nether-lips*. Like the mouth it salivates and drinks, and can *flash an upright grin*. Such metaphors, like others for tabooed body parts, liken it to a non-taboo part. Terms like *bite*, *snatch*, *vice/visé*, *snapper*, *clam* and *oyster* extend the metaphor by suggesting a mouth ready to snap up a penis; the myth of *vagina dentata* – the vagina with teeth that may mutilate a man – is found in Africa, America, Europe, and India. *Vice/visé* "tool for gripping" is doubtless immorally inspired, too. Note that *snapper*, *clam* and *oyster* are also fishy – a fishy odour being commonly attributed to this organ when washing was less

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<sup>14</sup> In Robert Greene's 1591 book *A Notable Discovery of Coosnage*, cited in Baugh and Cable (1978: 208).

prevalent than it is today; we therefore find terms like *fish(tail)* and *ling* for “vagina” (and *hook* for “penis”); *mermaid* was a euphemism for “whore”. The plant *Chenopodium vulvaria*, also known as stinking goosefoot, is ‘readily told by its repulsive smell of decaying fish’ (Fitter 1971). The noun and verb *fishfinger* denote “digital stimulation of a woman” (for which my favourite term is *firkytoodling* (Farmer and Henley 1890-1904); and *fishing* or *angling* “digital stimulation of the vagina; copulation”, and *fishbreath* arises from “oral sex”. Grose and others (1811) list the wonderful metaphor *the miraculous pitcher, that holds water with the mouth downwards*: it seems unlikely that this lengthy example of verbal play was widely used, and its flippancy is reminiscent of euphemisms like *kick the bucket*<sup>15</sup> for “die” with their real or pretended disdain for a taboo.

Copulation is picturesquely described in figures such as ‘making the beast with two backs’ (Shakespeare *Othello* I.i.114), *banging, belly slapping, bonking, coupling, covering, doggy-dancing, folk-dancing, horizontal dancing, horizontal jogging, humping, jigjogging, mounting, riding, rolling in the hay, screwing, stitching, tugging, uptails all*, etc. as well as many terms of attack and penetration.

Most if not all of these can be classed euphemistic dysphemisms: many of them are phonetically similar to the dysphemism they replace and have a similar communicative function to that dysphemism; others are figurative evocations of the denotatum. So we see that there are basically two ways in which X-phemisms are created: by a changed form for the word or expression and by figurative language that results from the perceived characteristics of the denotatum. Both processes, but particularly the latter, are pragmatically controlled. X-phemisms are motivated by a speaker’s want to be seen to take a certain stance to a taboo expression, and by playfulness.

Many X-phemisms are figurative; many have been or are causing semantic change; some show remarkable inventiveness of either figure or form; and some are indubitably playful. Euphemism, for instance, can be achieved antithetically by both hyperbole (*to be in the hot seat*) and understatement (*anatomically correct doll*), by the use of learned terms or technical jargon instead of common terms (*faeces* for *shit*), and conversely by the use of colloquial instead of formal terms (*period* for *menstrual cycle*), by both general-for-specific substitution (*nether regions* and *down there* for *genitals*) and part-for-whole substitution (*tit* for *breast*), by both circumlocution (*companion animal* for *pet*) and abbreviation (*bra*), acronym (*snafu*

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<sup>15</sup> It is probable that *bucket* denotes “beam, yoke” to which an animal was trussed by its hind-legs while its throat was cut. This could be one source for the idiom, but the folk belief has a bucket kicked away as a person hangs.

/ 'snaflu/, alphabetism (*s.o.b* / 'es 'ʒou 'bi:/) or even complete omission (*the ladies/gents* omits *lavatory/toilet*), as well as by one-for-one substitution from the existing resources of the language (*f\*\*\**) or by borrowing from another language (*po* “chamber pot” from French *pot* /po/).

Dysphemism employs most of the same strategies as euphemism, but there are two main differences. One is that part-for-whole dysphemisms are far more frequent than general-for-specific ones, which is the converse of the situation with euphemisms: e.g. the use of *tits* for breasts<sup>16</sup> is part-for-whole, as are figurative epithets like in *He's a prick* which contrast with euphemistic counterparts showing whole-for-part substitutions like *chest* (speaking of a woman's breasts) and (legal) *person* (referring to genitalia). Other differences between the strategies for euphemism and those for dysphemism are predictable: circumlocution is most usually dysphemistic when it manifests an unwanted jargon; the use of borrowed terms and technical jargon is only dysphemistic when intended to obfuscate or offend the audience; and so forth.

Euphemism as a work of art falls into three categories: there are the artful euphemisms, like many of those used in street language, which make a striking figure, but which are the everyday vocabulary of a particular jargon; there are the artful euphemisms which mask their original taboo denotations to such an extent that the latter are not generally recognized; and finally there are the artful euphemisms which are meant to be as revealing – and in their own way as provocative – as diaphanous lingerie. As bawdy authors like Shakespeare and political satirists like Swift and Orwell well know, titillation of the audience is the best way to draw attention to their message.

X-phemisms of all kinds display folk-culture, and arise through similar linguistic stratagems to achieve different effects. An interesting perspective on the human psyche is to be gained from the study of language expressions used as a shield against the disapprobation of our fellows or malign fate, and others used as a weapon against those we dislike or as a release valve against the vicissitudes of life. Many euphemisms and dysphemisms demonstrate the poetic inventiveness of ordinary people: they reveal a folk culture that has been paid too little attention by lexicographers, linguists, literatarians, and pragmaticists.

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<sup>16</sup> Germanic *tit* is cognate with Romance-based *teat*. It is curious that the latter is apparently never used to denote a breast.

## 1.12 The contents of this Handbook

The aim of the *Oxford Handbook of Taboo Words and Language* is to offer comprehensive coverage of tabooed language as perceived by experts in general linguistics, cultural linguistics, sociolinguistics, anthropological linguistics, psycholinguistics, neurolinguistics, historical linguistics, linguistic philosophy, forensic linguistics, politeness research, publishing, advertising, and theology. Although the principal focus is the English language, reference is occasionally made to linguistic taboos in other languages in order to compare socio-cultural attitudes. The volume defines and describes taboo while investigating the reasons and beliefs behind linguistic taboos. The existence of taboos and the need to manage taboo lead not only to the censoring of behaviour and the imposition of censorship but also to language change and language development.

In Chapter 2, 'Taboo language and impoliteness', Jonathan Culpeper examines how taboo language interacts with linguistic politeness and impoliteness. Taboo topics typically threaten positive face – the positive values people feel the right to claim for themselves. Taboo words operate as general-purpose emotional aggravators. Taboo words like *Paki*, *nigger*, and *spastic* have relatively direct connections with social identity and are used to target positive face; others such as *fuck* and *shit* potentially violate sociality rights – expectations about what should and should not occur in the prevailing context. Taboo language often intensifies impoliteness; for example, *Go away!* may be impolite, but *Fuck off!* is much more so. Thus, taboo language occurs in concert with impoliteness with markedly high-frequency across a range of impoliteness formulae, but especially in insults.

In Chapter 3, 'Taboos in speaking of sex and sexuality', Eliecer Crespo Fernández elaborates on the powerful taboos that shape human behaviour and communication in respect of sex and sexuality. He discusses X-phemistic naming in the fields of homosexuality, conventional and unconventional sexual practices, masturbation, prostitution, pornography, and body parts. Because metaphor is a potent source for sexual vocabulary, close attention is paid to the role of figurative language. Sexual taboo is a breeding ground for X-phemistic references that perform communicative functions ranging from attenuation to offence, and from solidarity to dissimulation. Taboo terms may be used tenderly and lyrically, or brutally, lasciviously, and offensively. Context is vitally important to the way in which a potentially taboo word is interpreted (see Allan 2018).

In Chapter 4, 'Speaking of disease and death', Réka Benczes and Kate Burridge investigate the X-phemistic language use associated with serious medical conditions such as HIV/AIDS, cancer, and mental illness, and with death. The challenges of confronting the biological limits of our own bodies have brought forth a vast repository of X-phemistic

language for these topics that relies heavily on metaphor. The chapter questions whether such metaphors control or modify our attitudes towards diseases and death. Harking back to medieval superstitions, today's taboos on diseases arise from a fear of inducing a malady and from the stigma attached to diseases like AIDS/HIV, cancer, and dementia. Individuals might be lucky enough to avoid such horrible diseases, but everyone faces death sooner or later.

In Chapter 5, 'The psychology of expressing and interpreting linguistic taboos', Timothy Jay discusses the psychology of expressing and interpreting linguistic taboos in American English, warning that universal statements cannot be made about the production or interpretation of taboo word expressions because these are always influenced by the particular social, cultural, and physical context in which they occur. Citing large quantities of experimental data, Jay surveys frequencies with which different taboo terms are used, the perceptions of degrees of offensiveness, the significance of personality traits, the presence of emotional factors such as anger, injury, and frustration, and speaker intentions such as to insult, to be humorous, or to express catharsis. The chapter reveals that, far from demonstrating poverty of expressive ability, the use of tabooed epithets is normally a strategic indication of language fluency.

In Chapter 6, 'Taboo language awareness in early childhood', Timothy Jay takes us through taboo language awareness of English-speaking children between one and twelve years of age. Not surprisingly, children begin with a very small taboo lexicon of swearwords, insults and offensive words that becomes more adult-like by age twelve. Evaluations of taboo words by young children show that they are likely to judge mild terms much worse than older children and adults do. This may be because younger children most probably don't know so well as adults what the words mean but they do seem to recognise their communicative function and social effect. Jay raises the ethical problems of researching children's use of taboo words and proposes techniques for dealing with them.

In Chapter 7, 'Swearing and the brain', Shlomit Ritz Finkelstein examines taboo and the brain through the lens of involuntary swearing in neuropsychiatric disorders. The chapter explores and summarizes current knowledge about the neurophysiological substrata of the utterance of expletives – the relevant brain regions, pathways, neurotransmitters, and interactions with hormones. Clinical data are presented from patients of aphasia, Tourette syndrome, Alzheimer's disease, and brain injuries. Expletives and other automatic language abilities (like counting numbers, intonation) rely on the right hemisphere, whereas the left hemisphere is normally important for propositional language. Damage to the left inferior frontal gyrus typically stops inhibition of swearing, allowing the involuntary utterance of expletives. Finkelstein discusses



swearing as a response to pain and aggression. She ends by proposing directions for research on the biological substrata of swearing.

In Chapter 8, 'STICKY: Taboo topics in deaf communities', Jami N. Fisher, Gene Mirus, and Donna Jo Napoli write about taboo issues not obvious to those outside them. What is taboo in deaf communities (there is no homogenous 'deaf community') comprehends all those things which are taboo within the co-located hearing community, including taboos arising from personal identity characteristics such as gender and race. We should not be surprised that, typically, a deaf woman identifies as a woman rather than as a deaf person, a deaf African American as Black rather than as deaf, and so on and so forth. Fisher et al. draw our attention to additional taboos within deaf communities based on differing degrees of hearing loss and differing capabilities speaking and signing. There is 'hearing privilege' which advantages those with normal hearing and leads to deaf people often being at a social or informational handicap within the wider community, creating strained relationships between the hearing and the deaf. As Fisher et al. say 'Communities of hearing people that are oppressed or marginalized, and of which only a small, privileged group interacts with the majority culture, may well have analogous taboos.'

In Chapter 9, 'Taboo terms and their grammar', Jack Hoeksema examines the grammar of taboo terms in English, Dutch, and – briefly – German, Estonian, Polish, and modern Hebrew. He shows that taboo terms typically have an emotionally loaded effect that serves to strengthen both positive and negative statements, questions, commands, and even exclamatives (like *WTF!?!*). There are fascinating cultural differences: e.g. other than the archaic *A plague on both your houses* English does not use disease terms in oaths, insults, and other dysphemisms whereas Polish *Cholera!* is about equivalent to English *Damn!* and Dutch *Betsy lazerde haar schoenen onder het bed* 'Betsy tossed (literally, 'lepered', cf. English *lazar*) her shoes under the bed'. Dutch uses terms for homosexuals e.g. *flikker* 'queer, faggot' in a manner totally foreign to English, e.g. *Hij deed geen flikker* 'He did fuck all' (literally, 'he did no faggot'); *Ze flikkerden de boeken weg* 'They tossed (literally 'buggered') the books away'. On the other hand, only English allows taboo-word infixing as in *fan-fucking-tastic*.

In Chapter 10, 'Taboo as a driver of language change', Kate Burridge and Réka Benczes discuss taboo as a driver of language change and lexical obsolescence. Under the influence of taboo, existing vocabulary is often abandoned as speakers either borrow words from other languages, give new meaning to old expressions via metaphor and metonymy, deliberately remodel existing terms by modifying the pronunciation and/or spelling, or they create new expressions. Thus, word taboo disrupts regular change to play havoc with the conventions of historical and comparative linguistics that depend on fairly regular and predictable processes.

The fact that taboo terms are often replaced by euphemisms which in turn become taboo shows that the community objection is in fact to the referent of the taboo word (what it means), although it is often the form of the word that is complained about: e.g. '*Cunt*' is *such a vile word* but there is no similar complaint about non-taboo terms like *punt* or *country*.

In Chapter 11, 'Problems translating tabooed words from source to target language', Pedro Chamizo Domínguez looks at problems translating tabooed words from source to target language. Translating is always difficult because it needs to manage ambiguities and anachronisms in the source language as well as the differences in the semantic scope of lexical items and cultural disparities between the source and target language. When translating taboo expressions, matters of culture and political correctness are especially problematic. Chamizo Domínguez examines multiple translations into several languages of the same source language text to show how tabooed words, insults, invectives, and veiled allusions have been handled. He concludes that, whether consciously or unconsciously, translators have often softened or censored the exact scope of the original utterances in their translations.

In Chapter 12, 'Linguistic taboos in a second or foreign language', Jean-Marc Dewaele studies the issues that arise when second and foreign language (LX) users utter or encounter taboo words and expressions. LX users often suffer inadequate awareness of the meanings and pragmatic functions of taboo terms, in other words they are unsure about their exact meaning, their emotional force, their offensiveness, and their perlocutionary effects on native (L1) speakers. Because violations of taboo often mark in-group social identity, L1 speakers can react as though the LX speaker has no right to utter taboo expressions. Furthermore, because taboo is contextually determined, the LX speaker often has a faulty knowledge of appropriate contexts for the use of taboo terms. Such insecurities about the meaning, offensiveness, and appropriateness of taboo words make LX users vulnerable in social interactions, which is why they tend to refrain from using them, or choose less offensive ones than a L1 user would. There is also the fact that, measured by skin conductance responses, speakers normally find LX taboo terms less emotively stimulating than comparable terms in his or her own L1.

In Chapter 13, 'Philosophical investigations of the taboo of insult', Luvell Anderson examines various kinds of insult to determine what insult is. He concludes it is the undermining of reasonable expectations of respect. Anderson also utilizes Neu's (2008) telling distinction between being insulted – the result of a deliberate intentional act – and feeling insulted – which not only results from actually being insulted, but also from acts which unintentionally insult but nonetheless seem to undermine one's expectation of being respected. Anderson then turns his attention to slurs, which are a kind of insult. Subtle insults

are especially pernicious given the kind of latitude a devious speaker has in how much signaling is done versus how much is left up to the imaginative capabilities of the interpreter.

In Chapter 14, 'Religious and ideologically motivated taboos', I (Keith Allan) claim that religious ideologies are distinguished from non-religious ideologies but they are closely enough related that the proverb *cuius regio, eius religio* should be rephrased *cuius regio, eius ideologia* with wider application and truth. I elaborate on the names for and terms of address to gods and their cohorts, which are comparable with those used for other powerful dominators such as sovereigns and dictators and their courts. All ideological taboos arise from perceived traducing of dogma, and/or insult to revered and/or intimidating persons, institutions, and objects. Focusing on the relevant applicable language, I differentiate and discuss the taboos of heresy, blasphemy, and profanity, exemplifying from the histories and treatment of traitors, heretics, witches, martyrs, blasphemers, and profaners from the time of the Maccabees around 200BCE to the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre in 2015CE.

In Chapter 15, 'Speech or conduct? Law, censorship, and taboo language', Christopher Hutton examines linguistic censorship mostly within the common law jurisdictions of UK, USA, Australia, and Hong Kong; he appraises their legal rationale in making the distinction between language use and non-linguistic conduct. He reviews case law in respect of blasphemy, public order offences, obscenity, key literary trials, broadcasting, popular music, trademark law, and personal names. In the 1960s and 1970s, censorship led to clashes between the power-elite and progressive activists over what was to be tabooed. Today, the new taboos are hate speech, misogyny, and on-line trolling. The rise of the internet has allowed almost everyone ready access to tabooed topics, objects, and activities and created difficulties for those who would censor such access. In many domains the law has retreated from linguistic censorship, but there is continued debate over the control of the rights and freedoms of speakers and writers as against those of their audiences.

In Chapter 16, 'Taboo language in books, films, and the media', Gabriele Azzaro starts with written dysphemisms from Ancient cultures in Mesopotamia, Egypt, India, Greece, and Rome before progressing to modern times. Censorship was imposed but failed to prevent a panoply of sexual and scatological linguistic expressions. An essentially similar history applies to taboo usage in the press, films, and broadcast media. All the classic functions of swearing which have been noted in spontaneous oral taboo language are represented in print, film, and the various electronic media. In the English speaking world today there seems to be less censoring of published (potential) dysphemism. Whether this is true for other communities remains to be established.

In Chapter 17, 'Taboos and bad language in the mouths of politicians and in advertising', Toby and Barnaby Ralph tell us about linguistic taboos in advertising and the mouths of politicians – would-be persuaders of the public. Profanity is able to make the utterer seem objectionable and dominant or amusing and companionable; thus it may have either positive effects by forming bonds or negative effects by being interpreted (and perhaps intended) as ill-mannered, offensive, and/or threatening. Many real examples from advertising and politics are considered and evaluated against their use as opposed to their avoidance. As fashions in taboo change over time, such issues as menstruation and homosexuality are less taboo while sexism and racialism have grown more so. Expressions like *damn* and *bloody* raise few eyebrows now; *shit* and *bugger* are fairly palatable, and the once unspeakables *fuck* and *cunt* are used in Parliament and even in adverts.

In Chapter 18, 'Taboo language used as banter', Elijah Wald examines the use of taboo terms to cement familial and peer relationships by selectively breaking taboos. In what are known as 'joking relationships' people demonstrate in-group solidarity by behaving to each other in mocking or insulting ways that would be unacceptable behaviour towards out-groupers. Such behaviour is always verbal, sometimes physical, horseplay such as sexual grabbing, and potentially painful tussling. Joking relationships are illustrated from communities in Austronesia, Native America, Africa, and America. Most celebrated among African Americans is 'capping' or 'the dozens' with insults directed at the target's family, in particular the mother. As Wald so rightly says: 'Banter, even in the most friendly situation, is a form of combat. And combat, even in the most dire situation, may be thrilling as well as horrific.'

In Chapter 19, 'Taboo language as source of comedy', Barry J. Blake amuses us with a review of taboo violations for comedic purposes. Laughter can be evoked simply by the outrageous act of taboo violation, as with Liza Dolittle's 'Not bloody likely!' in Act III of George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*. First acted in Britain in April 1914, the so-called 'Shavian adjective' caused huge controversy along with the laughter. Then there are deliberate puns and (in)advertent double entendres such as in 'The Simpsons: A Tale of Two Springfields' (2000, 12,2) when the residents of Old Springfield discover gold in the river after Homer turns off the dam; TV news personality Kent Brockman says *Thanks, Mayor Simpson! From now on, we'll all be taking golden showers*. There are word plays like in the childish: *What's long and thin, covered in skin, red in parts, and stuck in tarts? Rhubarb*. And I recall being reprimanded by my grandfather as a preteen boy repeatedly singing: *A sod-, a sod-, a soldier I will be / Fuck you, Fuck you, for curiosity / To piss, To piss, two pistols on my knee / To fight for the old cunt, fight for the old cunt, fight for the old country*.

This ditty plays on phonetic similarity to several tabooed expressions and also exhibits verbal circumventions of tabooed words. My Czech friends were shocked but amused when they first encountered the place name Kunda Park (an industrial suburb in Queensland, Australia) because *kunda* is a Czech cognate of English *cunt*: cf. Czech *vlhká kunda* “wet pussy”, also to *je ale kunda* of a woman “what a bitch”.

Finally, in Chapter 20, ‘An anthropological approach to taboo words and language’, Stanley H. Brandes emphasizes cultural relativity: language that is perfectly decorous in one community is often unseemly or scandalous in another. Tabooed behaviour is viewed negatively and, consequently, is open to public rebuke, collective scorn, ostracism, and even physical aggression. From within the frameworks of cultural anthropology and folkloristics Brandes discusses examples of tabooed language from sub-Saharan Africa, Spain, Latin America, and (within the USA) Native America, and African America. Tabooed words and expressions vary enormously from one ethnic, gender, national, and class group to another. Offensive words, inappropriate expressions, violations of proper discourse are ubiquitous. But they are situational, dependent on the particular contexts in which they are uttered. They can be used to unite people under a common cultural umbrella and they can be divisively antagonistic abusive terms of address. The chapter reviews nicknaming, verbal duelling, and various types of joking relationships, among other speech forms, as anthropologically prominent forms of tabooed language.

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