

# An Analysis on Dynamic and Static Aspects of Language Taboo from Cross-cultural Perspective

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**Abstract:** With acceleration of globalization, cross-cultural communication is increasing day by day. Language is the carrier of culture and promotes effective communication. Under the multicultural context of cross-cultural communication, language taboo regarded as part of culture is one of important sensitive issues. Because there are always some conflicts in the cross-cultural communication. Some conflicts are caused by language taboo. This article starts from cross-cultural perspective, deeply interprets language taboo in all aspects, understands and masters phenomenon to take appropriate measures, aims to provide constructive views of exploring cross-cultural communication skills. Knowing the static and dynamic changes of language taboo phenomenon would help people effectively master communicational skills to avoid misunderstandings.

**Keywords:** Cross-cultural Communication, Language Taboo, Dynamic and Static Analysis, Communication Skills

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## 1. Introduction

As a cross-cultural communication tool, Language is the bridge to link two kinds of culture. Meanwhile, taboo is an unavoidable topic in the cross-cultural communication. In the same cultural system, there is also an old saying "Ten li apart, but the customs are quite different." It means that the differences of taboos in different cultures are much more obvious. Taboo can be divided into language taboo and nonverbal taboo. Language taboo is not only a kind of ordinary language phenomenon, but also a reflection of culture. That is to say, it is a language appearance with a strong national culture characteristic. In 20C 80s, the studies of language taboos abroad were more deeper, in which the most influential works included *Sociolinguistics* (1980) and *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (1986). *Sociolinguistics* mainly describes the definition, significance and functions of language taboos. On the other hand, Foreign Language Teaching and Research published *Language and Culture—Anguage and culture* written by Den Yanchang and Liu Runqing in 1989. This book demonstrates the importance of culture in communication and points out skills of communication. However, there are still some insufficient aspects. Studies about avoidance strategy towards language taboo are few and need to be researched further.

This study focus on the origin, meaning, content, characteristics and methods of treatment of language taboo in the background of cross-cultural communication. Besides, combined with situational theory, the study would make a dynamic analysis of taboos' actual use and changes in the verbal communication so that people could get much more profound understanding of this phenomenon. According to analysis of static and dynamic changes of language taboo phenomenon, it could help people have a good understanding about the differences of taboo between different cultures and make sure the smooth interaction in verbal communication.

## 2. Static Analysis of Language Taboo

It can be said static description to analysis language taboo phenomenon from a perspective of relations between language and culture.

Language taboo originally comes from "Tabu". [1] Taboo is Polynesian. In the 18th century British navigator Captain Cook landed at the South Pacific Tanga Islands, finding lots of taboos at the island. taboo is the transliteration of the indigenous vocabulary "sacred", then is introduced into English by Cook and expressing taboo. "Tabu" phenomenon includes two aspects, on one hand, "respected fetishes are not allowed to use". On the other hand, "cheap things can not be

easily touched." Thus, the language "Tabu" also contains two meanings: the language of spiritual objects worship and language prohibition or substitution. The spiritual worship of language refers that the language is given a feeling and power of Superman beyond itself and is connected with the human calamity to make itself a kind of worship object. At this point, the language is no longer a carrier or communication tool, but divine thought itself, mostly religious or political product. In China, the most typical name taboo is undoubtedly the ancient taboo. Ancient taboo is a unique historical cultural phenomenon in ancient Chinese history; it focuses on referring the name of emperors, saints, sons and the Venerable. As the identity of the master status, the name was deified, when facing with the same name whether in oral language or written language, people always try to avoid or take another way to rewrite to show respect. Language prohibition or substitution means taboo language promotes the emergence of euphemism. When people do not want to say some taboo words, they would choose other words instead, like circumlocution which both sides know but do not want to say directly. All nice, alternative or suggestive words are euphemisms.

Language taboo contains three aspects: taboo appellation, taboo words and taboo topics. [2] Taboo appellation is the first point which needs to be paid more attention in cross-cultural communication. As in bilinguals, for example, English and Chinese, in the English-speaking countries, especially in the United States, the concept that all men are created equal is deeply rooted in people's cultural psychology. So their names can be addressed regardless of age, status and dignity. At a certain degree, this form of address will make each other feel closer. While in the Han culture, appellation taboo can be recognized to have a unique historical development track. Like principle of feudal moral conduct, respect for seniority, priority in rank, all these deep-rooted concepts in national patriarchy make people regularly "comity" and "taboo." Taboo words mainly refer to the prohibition of wicked, obscene, blasphemous words. Such as secret "dead", "sex", "god" and so on in closely-guarded secret. Taboo topics are for cross-cultural communication. English speaking countries discuss the topics which try to avoid marriage, age, personal privacy and so on. When it comes to the most appropriate topic, it is definitely the weather. [3] At the same time, it is also necessary to know the advocacy of the dragon in the Han culture.

Language taboos have distinct characteristics which are inseparable from the history and culture of language production. First of all, the universal characteristic. It is prevalent in the world regardless of any ethnic groups. People are social group members so that the language taboo in cross-cultural communication will inevitably appear. Secondly, the national characteristic, all language taboos have their cultural agency. Nida pointed out that a kind of language in a way does reflect the culture of society. However the innate generative mechanism of culture has its own characteristics. Mapping in the language will be different and performance in the language taboo is much more national. [4] The differences

on historical development, social system, concept of values, customs, lifestyle and other aspects caused the differences of content and form of the national language taboo. Thirdly, epochal characteristic. The generation of language is "accompanied by the formation of human society and its changing follows the changes in social life and development." Therefore, language taboos take the language as a carrier changing with social times. To a certain extent, it also reflects the social and cultural characteristics of the day. Some words taboo in ancient times can be accepted and generous mentioned by people gradually with the change of times. While in another condition because of the extensive application of emerging information multimedia network tools, new language taboo will re-emerge. Fourthly, homoplasy characteristic, it would mainly focus on cultural horizontal comparison. [5] With cross-cultural communication increasingly frequent, Chinese and Western cultures interact with each other, language taboos also show a certain degree of homoplasy characteristic. For example, Focusing on personal privacy, personal age and the number thirteen gradually become a common taboo.

### 3. Dynamic Analysis of Language Taboo

The participants in cross-cultural communication will be affected by a variety of factors and choose different codes. So it is necessary to make a dynamic analysis of language taboo use and changes in the communication activities. Context theory in sociolinguistics is very enlightening about language taboo in communication. "Many features of language are directly related to the context or situational characteristics of the communicative activity, but the classification of the context is different, most of the classification methods consider following factors as a major role: Settings, participants, activities." said British linguist Kristel.

First of all, the participants of cross-cultural communication. It mainly relates to gender, self-cultivation, and relationship between two sides in communication. Generally speaking, language taboo rules constrain women a lot. "Women are more likely to use euphemism than men on any occasion, and if women occasionally use some language taboos, they are considered ill-bred or uneducated." (Wang Dechun, 1995: 215) Furthermore, Lakoff also mentioned that "women do not use the vulgar words which offend against good taste, and women are experts in the use of euphemism." (Lakoff, 1975: 55) [6] In addition to gender, cultural accomplishment of communicative participants also affects people's perception of taboos. Level of cultural accomplishment determines the elegance and vulgarity of language use. In Chinese and foreign literature are full of these examples. The relationship between two sides in communication is also an important factor which affects people's view of taboo. The closer both sides is, the less language taboo is. Sometimes the use of taboo language even can show the friendly and close friendship of them. Two intimate friends in a private communication maybe use a few vulgar words. This is what we talk: dynamic change of

language taboo.

Second, scenes and occasion intensively restrict the use of language taboo. Formal or informal occasions about the choice of code is clearly different. Such as churches, banquets, meetings and other solemn occasions, bars, athletic changing room, playground and other places. These places are applicable to different codes so that language taboo phenomenon is also very different. However, the intimate participant can speak freely and language taboo rules are less restrictive to them. [7] The topic about sex, physiology and excretion is generally regarded as taboo from the social and cultural level. People rarely talked about these topics, but when context is different, it may have to express in detail. For example, a doctor asks his patient's situation. Therefore, the language taboo phenomenon is not absolute. It will change with the relative change of the context.

#### 4. Cross-cultural Communication Skills

Language taboo is not only a linguistic phenomenon, but also a sociolinguistic phenomenon. Its formation is the results of combined effects such as the social and cultural factors, social psychological factors and context factors. [8] it is very important to study understanding and using in context. Samovar and others suggest that in cross-cultural communication, we should have the sense of intercultural communication. Firstly, to understand each other's "culture", "attitude" and "communication behavior". Secondly, to learn "Cultural adaptation" to accept their taboo better. It can be seen that language taboo is not harmful to society. On the contrary, Its reasonable use can promote social stability and development and be benefit people's daily life. [9]

For the treatment of language taboo, what we are familiar with is the euphemism. [10] It refers to adopt some words which are more polite and easy to accept to avoid embarrassment even add a conflict language taboo. In the end purposes that are a healthy and effective cross-cultural exchange will be achieved. Besides inquiry method, when in Rome, do as the Romans do. Before communication the initiative thing is to ask each other's taboo which will make others have positive sense on you. In contrast, there is a reversed approach: method of avoidance. Mainly referring known language taboo. It usually is used on some difficult circumstances.

Except well-known conventional communication skills, to cultivate cross-cultural thinking in daily life is very important. The cultivation of thinking ability is helpful to understand cultural differences, to resolve cultural conflicts and to achieve effective communication in cross-cultural communication. Furthermore, the expansion of language taboos and corresponding euphemisms. Try best to avoid language taboos and the intercultural communication disorder. More attention should be paid to cultivating cultural adjustment ability which mainly refers to the communicative participants in the cross-cultural environment actively adjust their behavior according to cultural characteristics or conflict. In case there happened language taboos and other cultural

conflicts, having a good psychological adjustment ability could timely adjust the psychological state, stabilize communication mood. Multicultural context need strong cultural adjustment ability.

Then body language. It is a special non-verbal communicational way to express emotion. Body language is mainly to coordinate the activities of all parts of the body. It is found by psychology research that when we manage to convey complete messages to others, the simple language expression only occupies 7/100, the tone accounts for 38/100, most of messages is expressed through the body language, and rarely deceptive. [11] Therefore, the use of body language is an essential and effective means to avoid the taboo language in the process of cross-cultural communication. But all these kinds of body languages about the meaning is not unified. Different cultures on the same body language expression is also different and full of uncertainty. This is determined by culture, values, and conception of history. In the process of intercultural communication, there are some occasions in which body language is misused so that a misunderstanding would occur and bring failure of communication. But it cannot be denied that using body language is an indispensable means of avoiding the taboos in public places or talking about sensitive topics. More attention must be paid to understand the meaning of body language in different countries and fully know the different meanings of different cultures. Because it is a guarantee of smooth communication.

Moreover, white lies are sometimes necessary in communication although honesty is always advocated as traditional virtues by human. A white lie is for good reasons with no viciousness. So this is not to deceive each other but to express their respects for others. They try to avoid hurting others' self-respect to achieve successful communication. In the process of cross-cultural communication, making good use of white lies to avoid contradictions and conflicts could be understood and accepted.

At the same time, there is another approach of communication which is more common and effective: start from asking questions. [12] Asking questions would promote communicate and relax embarrassing atmosphere. In the process of global integration, cross-cultural communication gets more frequently. When we communicate with each other, we often encounter some confusing problems. So asking questions is an effective way to know culture, history, values and language of other countries. In the process of cross-cultural communication, it is a good strategy to avoid taboo language.

#### 5. Conclusion

Language and culture are always in the process of historical development with a dynamic perspective, exploring new phenomenon behind the cultural changes and achieving cross-cultural communication to maximize the smoothness. To pay much more attention to language taboo phenomenon is necessary. It is a wonderful way to be close with the world. Because there are always some conflicts in the cross-cultural

communication. One type of these conflicts is caused by language taboo. When you are in a total different culture, you maybe make mistakes by using some words which are forbidden at that place while you self think no problem. So when facing these situations, keeping aware of language taboo, knowing the static and dynamic changes of language taboo phenomenon, managing to master communicational skills to avoid misunderstandings are vital and significant.

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