

‘RAISING GOOSEFLESH’ ‘DIRTY’ WORDS AND LANGUAGE CHANGE

Keith Allan (Monash University)
Kate Burridge (La Trobe University)

ABSTRACT

This paper examines an area of folk culture that has been paid too little attention by lexicographers, literatarians and linguists alike. This is the world of euphemism (or evasive language) and its counterpart dysphemism (or offensive, abusive language). No matter which human group we look at, past or present, euphemism and dysphemism are powerful forces there and they are enormously important for the study of language change.

1. Introduction

Word taboo is an emotive trigger for word addition, word loss, phonological distortion and semantic shift. It plays perpetual havoc with the methods of historical comparative linguistics, even undermining one of the very cornerstones of the discipline — the arbitrary nature of the word. When it comes to taboo words, speakers behave as if there were a very real connexion between the actual physical shape of the words and their taboo sense. This is why these words are able to “raise gooseflesh” and are often described — unfairly — as “dirty” words.

Study in the area of word taboo can also shed light on the question of why certain expressions become conventionalized over time, while others never do. When we investigate the etymologies of successful figurative expressions created for euphemistic and dysphemistic purposes, we find networks of sources supporting the established figures. Such semantic networks seem necessary if expressions like these are to survive — those without have much narrower currency and typically drop by the wayside.

In these and in other areas investigated in this paper, Historical Linguistics has much to discover by delving into the language of taboo.

2. What is euphemism?

In 1911 Sir James Frazer said of euphemism by hunters in primitive (he might have said “savage”) societies:

The speaker... avoids certain words and substitutes others in their stead, either from a desire to soothe and propitiate..., or from a dread that... he... would excite... anger or... fear
(Frazer1911:417)

What Frazer says here is applicable to many of the euphemisms we shall be discussing, but to encompass the enormously wide range of expressions that have been called euphemisms we need to define them as follows:

A **euphemism** is used as an alternative to a dispreferred expression, in order to avoid possible loss of face: either one’s own face, or though giving offense, that of the audience, or of some third party.

Folk belief has it that what we are calling here ‘dispreferred expressions’ typically denote taboo topics, and therefore might alternatively be called ‘taboo terms’. In its original conception, as borrowed from Tonga, taboo is of course prohibited behaviour, in particular, behaviour believed dangerous to certain individuals or to the society as a whole. Here

violations of what in effect are absolute taboos are expected to have dire consequences. To violate the taboo would automatically cause harm (even death) to the violator or his/her fellows — here euphemism can be literally a matter of life or death.

However, many of the taboo terms we shall be discussing are avoided because their use is regarded as distasteful within a given social context: they are dispreferred, not because of any fear that physical or metaphysical harm may befall either the Speaker or the Audience, but lest the Speaker lose face by offending the sensibilities of the Audience. Some speakers would claim that to utter the taboo terms would offend their own sensibilities because of the supposed unpleasantness or ugliness of the taboo terms themselves. The taboos of contemporary Western society typically rest on traditions of etiquette — here euphemism is the polite thing to do, and offensive language (or dysphemism) is little more than the breaking of a social convention.

3. There are taboos and taboos

On the face of it, euphemism is not such a bit deal in English as in say, Austronesian societies, but the differences are probably more apparent than real. Taboos, and attitudes towards taboo violation do change over time. It was not so very long ago that some transgressions against our own Western taboos were severely punished — by such as imprisonment, hanging, or burning at the stake. In Britain up until the end of the 17th century, blasphemy was punishable by burning. There are still people who would take such biblical commandments as Leviticus 24:16 literally ‘He that blasphemeth the name of the Lord, he shall surely be put to death, and all the congregation shall certainly Stone him’. And even though few in our technically advanced and (for some) secular 20th century would admit to the sort of fear and superstition that we associate with the taboos of exotic and unenlightened peoples, there are many in it who carry talismans when they travel, avoid walking beneath ladders, knock on wood, believe in lucky and unlucky numbers; for some people talking about a disease is enough to bring on specific symptoms; and medical students are notorious for discovering that they manifest the symptoms of whatever disease they happen to have been studying. And if words can make us sick, they also have curative power; thus, doctors have to admit that many cited cancer cures have non-rational explanations.

As some taboos relax, others also come to replace them. In this era of self-congratulatory equality for all there are now legally recognised sanctions against what could be called -ist language. The new taboos are sexism, racism, ageism and religiousism so that sexist, racist, ageist, religiousi language is not only contextually dysphemistic, but also legally dysphemistic. In a sense these replace the relaxing laws against profanity, blasphemy and obscenity.

Looked at this way, the social constraints on the observation of verbal taboos in places like Austronesia do seem less exotic. Certainly, there are cultural differences with respect to the use of euphemism and dysphemism, but they are differences in degree rather than differences in kind. Attitudes to bodily effluvia, body parts, to notions of social status and the like, to death, disease, to dangerous animals and to the supernatural vary tremendously between cultures; but essentially these same parameters recur in every culture (and subculture) to motivate euphemism and dysphemism.

4. A typology of euphemism

Let us now briefly consider some of the most important sources for euphemism. Although the examples we give below all derive from English, they illustrate categories which occur again and again across the world's languages — many of them are of enormous significance for the study of language change. As will become apparent, many euphemisms seem to fall into

more than one of these categories at the same time (for a more detailed typology of euphemism, see e.g. Allan & Burridge 1991: Ch. 1).

Many euphemisms are figurative; many have been or are being the cause of semantic change; some show remarkable inventiveness of either figure or form; and some are indubitably playful. Terms range from the keenly inventive to the downright crass (see 4.1 below). A number of examples disguise offending terms by distorting or remodelling them in some way. For example, before *coney* “rabbit” dropped out of use in the late 19th century, it was pronounced [ˈkouni] to phonologically dissimilate it from the taboo homonym meaning “cunt”. In Austronesian languages these sorts of tabooistic remodellings wreak havoc with the comparative phonology of once cognate terms in related languages to cause a great deal of confusion among comparative linguists (cf. discussion in Section 6.1 below).

Euphemism can be achieved through often antithetical means: on the one hand, circumlocution and on the other hand, abbreviation, acronym or even complete omission and also one-for-one substitution (see 4.2 below); general-for-specific and part-for-whole (terms we prefer to the more traditional synecdoche and metonymy; see 4.3 below); hyperbole and understatement (see 4.4 below); and finally the euphemistic use of a learned term or technical jargon versus a colloquial one (see 4.5 below).

Using words borrowed from other languages to function as euphemisms is characteristic of many languages. For instance, among Thais fluent in English, including doctors addressing well-educated patients, English words are used in preference to Thai euphemisms for penis, vagina, menstruation (abbreviated to *men* — but probably not from *menses*) and sperm. It is interesting that other body parts and bodily effluvia not generally rendered in English, just those connected with reproduction. In Papua New Guinea, Tok Pisin and English are often used for taboo items — it seems these languages are neutral and the words have no power to harm anyone; cf. Holzkecht (1988:58).

The use of Latin provides Standard English with euphemisms for bodily effluvia, sex and the associated acts and bodily organs (see 4.6 below).

4.1 Euphemism and verbal play:

figures, metaphors, flippancies and remodellings:

Figurative expressions: *the cavalry's come* for “I’ve got my period”, also metaphorical in implicitly representing the onset of catamenia as the arrival of the red-coated cavalry. A more inventive metaphor: *The miraculous pitcher, that holds water with the mouth downwards* for “vagina”; also verbal play and flippancies, cf. *kick the bucket* for “die”. Certain slang terms exemplify verbal play, i.e. rhyme, quasi-reduplication, alliteration, pleasing rhythms, silly

in words etc. Some examples (a couple of them archaic) are: *Over-shoulder-boulder-holders* “bra”; ‘*Wham, barn, thank you ma’am!*’; *hoddy-doddy (all arse and no body)* “a short clumsy person”; *om-tiddly-om-pom* and *umpti-poo* for “toilet”; *tantadlin tart* “turd”; *tallywags* or *twiddle-diddles* “testicles”; *doodle, diddle, dink, dong* “penis”; *tuzzy muzzy* “vagina”; *rantum scantum* “copulate”; numerous terms for “masturbate”: *beat the bishop / beaver / pull the pope, pull one’s pud, crank one’s shank, jerkin’ the gherkin, tweak one’s twinkie, juice the sluice, stump-jump*. Rhyming slang *jimmie-riddle* “piddle, piss”, *bristols [Bristol cities]* “titties / breasts”, *Brahms [and Liszt]* “pissed, drunk”, etc. Remodellings like *sugar, shoot* or *shucks* for “shit”, *darn, dang, drat* for “damn” etc.

4.2 Circumlocutions, clippings, acronyms, abbreviations, omissions and one-for-one substitutions:

Circumlocutions *little girl's room* for “toilet”. Clippings like *jeeze* for “Jesus”. Acronyms like *snafu* “situation normal, all fucked up” and *commfu* “complete monumental military fuck up”. Abbreviations like *S.O.B.* for “son-of-a-bitch” or *pee* “piss”. Also *f---* instead of printing “fuck”. Quasi-omissions *a*****. Full omissions: *There's a pot calling kettle black* which omits *arse* from the end. One-for-one substitutions like *bottom* for “arse”, *casket* for “coffin”.

4.3 General-for-specific / part-for-whole euphemisms:

Euphemisms like the legal term *person* for “penis” employ the general-for-specific strategy (it is also a one-for-one substitution). There are various subclasses of general-for-specific: the euphemism just mentioned is whole-for-part; *nether regions* for “genitals” invokes the general- area-for-a-specific-area-within-it, as does *chest* for “breast”; *go to bed* for “copulate” invokes the usual-location-where-a-specific-event-takes-place etc. Then there are the maximally-general- for-something-specific strategy to denote almost anything that can be properly inferred from context (*thing* used for everything from the “Watergate break-in” to “genitals”; cf. U.S President Nixon's reference to *prething* and *postthing*). The number of general-for-specific subclasses is probably boundless. A part-for-whole euphemism is demonstrated in *spend a penny* for “go to the lavatory”; euphemisms of this kind seem comparatively rare, though dysphemisms are not.

4.4 Hyperbole and understatement in euphemism:

Hyperboles *flight to glory* meaning “death”; *Personal Assistant to the Secretary (Special Activities)* for “cook”; *villa in a premier location by the bay* “dilapidated artisan's cottage, five streets away from the bay”. Understatements like *sleep* for “die”. Many general-for-specific euphemisms are also understatements, e.g. *thing* for “Watergate break-in”, “genitals” (or whatever); *deed* for “act of murder” (or whatever).

4.5 Learned terms or technical jargon and colloquial or common terms as euphemisms:

The use of learned terms or technical jargon instead of common terms. Examples are *treponemal disease*, *luetice disease*, *spirachoeetal disease* for “syphilis”; *faeces* for “shit”. The antithetical strategy is to use colloquial rather than more formal terms, as with the use of *cupid's measles* for “syphilis”; *period* for “menstruation”.

4.6 “Excuse my French” — Euphemism through Borrowing:

The use of *perspire* instead of *sweat*, *expectorate* instead of *spit*, *defecate* and *faeces* instead of *shit*, *copulate* instead of *fuck*, *labia* instead of *lips* [of the vagina], and so forth, is accepted practice when using Standard English.

Until recently translations of taboo terms from exotic languages, and descriptions of taboo acts, caused an author to suddenly switch from English to Latin. In the following example, Hollis (1905), in his translation of *The Masai: Their Language and Folklore*, renders the very brief Masai tale almost entirely in Latin.

The Story of the Sky and the Earth

We understand that the sky once married the earth. Haec verba dicere volunt. Ut maritus supra feminam in coitione iacet, sic coelum supra terram. Ubi lucet sol et cadit imber, terra calorem recipit et humorem: non aliter femina hominis semine fruitur.

(Hollis 1905:279)

[Translation of Latin: ‘They say that just as a husband lies over his wife to make love, so does the sky lie above the earth. When the sun shines and the rain falls, the earth receives heat and water: in the same way a woman is fertilized by a man’]

In dictionaries also Latin was used euphemistically — probably because of the author’s prudery in not wishing to use everyday English terms, but with the added rationalization that the Latin text would be uninterpretable to the uneducated, the young and the innocent. Latin is of course not the only foreign language for English euphemisms. There is also French: *po* for “chamber pot” from French *pot* (in which the final -t is not pronounced), *lingerie* for “women’s underclothing”, *masseuse* for “prostitute”, *sortie* for “a sallying forth by a military unit” and so on. In America, particularly in proximity to New York, Yiddish is a source for euphemistic terms such as *tush(y)* “bottom” which is really “Yinglish” from Yiddish *tokhes/tukhes*, itself a euphemism derived from Hebrew *takhath* “under”.

5. Word taboo and the ‘naturalist hypothesis’

Despite the fact that every language has some vocabulary based on sound symbolism, and even though everyone within a language community must tacitly concur in using a certain form with certain meanings, the correlation between the form and the meaning of a language expression is largely arbitrary. One of the cornerstones of Historical Linguistics is that there is no necessary or natural connexion between the physical shape of a word and what it denotes. It is this which gives us our license to compare languages and to reconstruct lost linguistic stages. Therefore, there is no *a priori* basis for the distinction between the mentionable euphemism and the unmentionable taboo term. It is mysterious why the euphemistic expressions *pass away*, *misappropiate*, *we’ll have to let you go*, and *I’m going to the loo* have fewer unpleasant connotations than their corresponding taboo terms *die*, *steal*, *You’re fired* and *I’m going for a piss*. The difference presumably derives from the ‘naturalist hypothesis’ (Allan 1986, Section 2.8), in other words — a persistent belief that the form of an expression somehow communicates the essential nature of whatever it denotes; in Sir James Frazer’s words: “... the link between a name and the person or thing denominated by it is not a mere arbitrary and ideal association, but a real and substantial bond which unites the two...” (Sir James Frazer 1911:3 18). People behave as if the name and the thing were inseparable. (Recall the little girl who on seeing her first pig pointed out the appropriateness of the name — for it was indeed a very dirty creature!).

Euphemism involves a kind of doublethink: in a given context, something, often tabooed can be acceptably spoken of using a euphemism but not using a dysphemism. It is as if the denotatum were viewed from two opposing points of view. The taboo terms are of course contaminated by the taboo topics which they denote; but by definition the euphemisms are not — or not yet — contaminated. In fact, more often than not a euphemism does degenerate into a taboo term through contamination by the taboo topic. Invariably, its powerful magic will fade. This usually results from society’s perception of a word’s tainted denotatum contaminating the word itself. The degree of contamination perceived in the denotatum ranges on a scale which has fear, abhorrence, loathing and contempt at one end, and nothing worse than low social esteem at the other.

To take some well-known examples: (1) The noun *accident* once meant “that which happens, a chance event” (cf. *accidentally*, *by accident*), but its association with misfortune has narrowed the meaning to “chance misfortune” (as in *He had an accident/There was an accident*). (2) English *undertaker* once meant “odd-job man” (someone who undertakes to do things) and was used as a euphemism for the person taking care of funerals; like most ambiguous taboo terms, the meaning of *undertaker* narrowed to the taboo sense alone, and is now being replaced by the euphemism *funeral director* (also *mortician*). What often happens

with euphemisms like this, is that they start off life with a modifying word (here ‘funeral’) and then the modifier is dropped as the phrase ceases to be euphemistic: consider *birth-control / contraceptive pill* > *pill* (In Australia certainly *pill* as a general term is avoided, and is in the process of being replaced by *tablet*). It is conceivable that *funeral director* will one day be clipped to mere *director* which will then follow *undertaker* and itself become a taboo term. (3) One of the most striking example of this sort of contamination is of course the rapid deterioration words to do with women. A great many words meaning “girl” can be seen to degenerate into dysphemisms as the result of having been used as euphemisms for “prostitute”, or at least “wanton woman”. The impact on the English lexicon has been enormous when you consider that there are well over 1000 terms to refer to women in a sexually derogatory way (cf. discussion in Schulz 1975). (4) Other striking examples are to be found in the area of mental illness. Like most stigmatising illnesses surrounded by fear and mystery, this has a chain of euphemistic synonyms as impressive as any that might have existed in early times. *Insane* [lit. Latin “not healthy”] is now confined to “mentally unsound” but originally had a much broader domain encompassing all bodily organs and their functions. Today even the form *sane* has narrowed under the influence of *insane* to denote only a mental condition. *Crazy* originally meant “cracked, flawed, damaged” (capturing the stereotypical mental patient as someone flawed deficient) and was applicable to all manner of illness but has now narrowed to mental illness. The history of the word *deranged* illustrates the typical path of development for euphemisms mentioned above. Originally from a verb mean “to disturb, disarrange”, it could be qualified with the modifier *mental* to be used of people who were “disturbed in the mind”. But once used in the context of mental illness the word soon became contaminated and now without the modifier it has narrowed to the “mad” sense alone (cf. *be/go mental*, and *become a mental patient*). It may well be that *disordered* and *afflicted* are moving in the same direction. Though still requiring a modifier like ‘mentally’ to refer specifically to psychiatric illness, this is now becoming their normal context of use. There are also many examples involving names for establishments holding mental patients. These too have narrowed to their taboo sense alone: consider the clipping of *lunatic asylum* to *asylum*.

The pejoration and narrowing in all the above cases has been extraordinarily rapid. And very few euphemisms (if any) which have degraded in this way into taboo terms come back from the abyss after they have lost their taboo sense. What this means of course are ever- changing chains of vocabulary for words denoting taboo concepts. And it is very apparent that the length of this chain can be directly correlated with the severity of the taboo. For example, the vocabulary for bodily effluvia, sex and tabooed body parts surely manifests significantly more synonymy than one finds anywhere else in the English lexicon. Here we are literally dealing with thousands of euphemisms. In English alone there are reportedly more than 1000 for “penis”, 1200 terms for the “vagina”, 800 for “copulation” and over 2,000 for “prostitute” (cf. Allan & Burridge 1991: chapter 4 for details).

There is a wealth of evidence that where a language expression is ambiguous between a taboo sense and a non-taboo sense, its meaning will usually narrow to the taboo sense alone.

(1) As mentioned earlier, *coney* was the word for “rabbit” until the late 19th c. when it dropped out of use because of the taboo homonym meaning “cunt”; where it still exists it has been dissimilated as in the place-name Coney Island. (2) The British still use *cock* to mean “rooster” but because of the taboo homonym meaning “penis”, this sense of *cock* started to die out in American in the early 19th C.; it is nowadays very rare in Australian. There has also been an effect on words containing *cock*; e.g. Many people with the surname *Koch* (Ed Koch, the :e former Mayor of New York) give their surname a spelling pronunciation /koč/ (cf. also Louisa May *Allcott* from *Alcox*). *Cockroach* is often foreclipped to *roach* in

American (but on the other hand *cockpit* and *cocktail* show no sign of being avoided). And although there may have been other factors at work too, the use of *haystack* in place of *haycock* and the use of *weather-vane* as an alternative to *weather cock* were undoubtedly influenced by taboo avoidance. (3) When *arse* collided phonologically with *ass* this caused problems for *ass* “donkey” which is now generally avoided in both American and Australian English. (4) Taboo avoidance is undoubtedly the reason why so many monosyllabic words in English beginning with *f* and ending in *k* have disappeared (Hock 1986:295 provides a list of some of these words). (5) Since the 1960s the adjective *gay* has been used less and less in the sense “bright/full of fun” because it also has the meaning “homosexual” (from 19th c. slang meaning “given to venery” — *a gay girl* was a “strumpet” not a “lesbian”).

There are two reasons at least why language abandons homonyms of taboo terms. One is the relative salience of taboo terms. In 1935, Allen Read wrote “The ordinary reaction to a display of filth and vulgarity should be a neutral one or else disgust; but the reaction to certain words connected with excrement and sex is neither of these, but a titillating thrill of scandalized perturbation”! Osgood, Suci & Tannenbaum (1957) discovered a general tendency for any derogatory or unfavourable denotation or connotation within a language expression to dominate the interpretation of its immediate context. More recently, MacWhinney et al. (1982:3 15) in a paper in *Memory and Cognition* found that “sentences with profane and sexually suggestive language elicited responses quite different from those [without...]. Sentences with off-colour language [a nice euphemism!] possess a memorability that is quite independent of their role in conversation”. The reason for this may be that obscene vocabulary is stored or accessed differently in the brain from other vocabulary; the evidence for this comes from people manifesting ‘Gilles de la Tourette’s syndrome’ — a disorder which is ‘characterized by unusual tics progressing to involuntary outbursts of foul language’ (Valenstein & Heilman 1979:42 1). And some people may manifest disorders whereby they lose all other language ability, which would only be possible if the means of storage and/or access were separate from that of obscene vocabulary; though why there should be such separation is a mystery.

The other reason for abandoning the homonyms of taboo terms is that a speaker simply will not risk appearing to use a taboo term when none was intended. For example, there are some (mostly older) English speakers who, if they catch themselves using the adjective *gay* in its former sense will, with mild embarrassment, explicitly draw attention to the intended meaning.

Where there is little likelihood of being misunderstood, the homonyms of a taboo term are likely to persist in the language. Bull meaning “bullshit” is dissimilated from bull “male, typically bovine, animal” because it heads an uncountable noun phrase instead of a countable one. However dissimilation is not always a protection for the innocent language expression and it is quite usual for speakers to avoid expressions simply because they are phonetically similar to taboo terms. This also works across languages. For example, our Thai students tell us that they are apprehensive about using the Thai word *fuk* ‘gourd pumpkin’ in the hearing of other Thais fluent in English. Apparently, they also avoid the English word *yet* which is similar to the colloquial Thai verb “to copulate”. There are many similar reports of cross-language effects — such is the power of taboo!

All this supports the view that taboo terms are classified as such because of a belief, be it ever so vague, that their form reflects the essential nature of the taboo topics they denote. This is exactly why the terms themselves are often said to be unpleasant or ugly sounding, why they are miscalled “dirty words”. It explains their ability to “chill the flesh and raise gooseflesh”, as one writer Wyld (1920:387) has described it.

6. Naming taboo and language change

To say a tabooed name is to assault the owner of the name, and requires sanctions to be brought against the offender. Punishment for violation of a taboo can be in the form of religious propitiation of an offended spirit, payment of goods to an offended party, exchange of goods to restore harmony between the guilty and the injured. Breaking the taboo can lead to death by murder, or suicide due to shame.

(Holzknecht 1988:45)

Naming forms a special case of word taboo which can be responsible for promoting widespread language changes and is therefore of immense importance for historical linguistics. There are, for example, naming taboos observed by people undertaking hazardous pursuits such as mining, hunting and fishing (e.g. taboos on the names of dangerous animals). These practices are motivated by fears comparable with those on death and disease and people use similar strategies to avoid calling down malfeasance upon themselves. Personal names (that is “true names”) are taboo among some peoples of all the inhabited continents, and on many of the islands between them. This is also a fear-based taboo; just as malevolent magic can be wrought with one’s bodily effluvia (faeces, spittle, nail parings, blood, hair clippings etc.), so can it be wrought when another person is in possession of one’s true name. The name of a person is associated with his/her essence, it is regarded as a proper part of the name bearer; it is not just a symbol but the verbal expression of his or her personality, and to offend it is as great a blow as physical assault. Thus in many languages a name is an inalienable possession; i.e. is assumed to be an inseparable part of the body and this is reflected in the grammar (other properties of personal representation such as mind, spirit, soul, shadow, reflection, etc. are often treated in the same way; cf Chappell and McGregor forthcoming). The following example is taken from Pitjantjatjara from Central Australia.

- | | | |
|-----|-----------------|-----------|
| (1) | ngayu-nya | mi |
| | 1 :s-ACCUSATIVE | name |
| | “my name” | |
| (2) | ngayu-nya | mara |
| | 1 :s-ACCUSATIVE | hand |
| | “my hand” | |
| (3) | ngayu-ku | karli |
| | 1 :s-POSSESSIVE | boomerang |
| | “my boomerang” | |

In ancient Egyptian mythology, Isis gained power over the sun god Ra because she persuaded him to divulge his name. In the European folktales about the evil character variously called Rumpelstiltskin (Germany, parts of England), Terry Top (Cornwall), Tom Tit Tot (Suffolk), Tnt-a-Trot (Ireland) Whuppity Stoorie (Scotland) and Ricidin-Ricdon (France), the discovery of the villain’s name destroyed his power. Even in English, when we say of Bill Jackson’s son Eric that ‘Eric’s a real Jackson’, we speak as if the surname itself carries the genes that make Eric ‘a chip off the old block’. The same is true for phrases like *make a name for oneself*; *have a good name*; *bring one’s name into disrepute*; *clearing one’s name* and so forth. Whatever we believe in fact, even in our society we speak as if the name carries the properties of the name bearer! And names do have such force — which is why of course proper names enter the general lexicon (like boycott, lynch etc.).

Because “true” names are so closely associated with their name-bearer as to be a proper part of him/her, in some societies (for example, in Austronesia) there are strict taboos preventing

two living persons from going by the same name. Furthermore “true” names are often secret, rendering euphemistic names necessary for public naming and addressing. For English, the taboo on a “true” name is observed only for *God* or *Christ* and even then only inconsistently.

In many societies, names of the dead are (or were until recently) taboo. In Tiwi (a non Pama-Nyungan Australian language) the ban is even more severe, for it extends even to those personal names which the dead person may have given to others. As the quote at the beginning of this section indicates, violations of such taboos are believed to cause misfortune, sickness and death; often they cause offense to living descendants, too. Although native English S speaking communities do not have quite such fearsome taboos, there are hosts of euphemisms for the topic of death and the dead.

6.1 When name taboo extends into word taboo

It is very common among the societies of Austronesia that names are or derive from common words. Thus name taboo can be extended to become word taboo, and this of course is of enormous interest to historical linguists. Simons (1982), for example, describes how of a sample of 50 Austronesian languages which are known to have some sort of naming taboo, 25 of these have a name taboo which extends into common word taboo. A further 18 have a taboo whereby words even resembling the tabooed names are taboo themselves. He reports (p. 158), for example, that on Santa Cruz [part of the Solomon Islands], where there is a taboo against using the name of certain affines, names consist of a common word, normally with a gender marking prefix. Thus if a man’s mother-in-law is called *ikio* (*i-* “prefix to female’s name”, *kio* “bird”) he cannot use the common word *kio* to refer to birds. Simons writes “this means that 46% of the basic vocabulary is potentially taboo for some people on the island” [on Malaita, this figure is as high as 59%]. Euphemisms are thus created via the methods outlined earlier; for example, semantic shifts of existing words, circumlocution, borrowing from another language and phonological modification. This can mean of course serious repercussions for comparative philologists working on these languages. For instance, people have long noted the problem of establishing regular sound correspondences for identifiable Austronesian roots (cf. discussion in Simons 1982; Ray 1926; Wurm 1970). Quite commonly, spontaneous irregular sound changes occur which still reflect direct inheritance rather than borrowing. For example, Simons (1982: 168) lists the following correspondences between Kwaio and Lau (Solomon Islands).

Kwaio	Lau	Meaning
<i>gani</i>	<i>dani</i>	day, daylight
<i>logo</i>	<i>rodo</i>	night, dark
<i>-ga</i>	<i>-da</i>	3rd possessive
<i>aga</i>	<i>ada</i>	look, see
<i>gamu</i>	<i>damu</i>	K. chew; L smack lips
<i>guigui</i>	<i>duidui</i>	vinegar ant
<i>ugu</i>	<i>udu</i>	a drop of water
<i>age</i>	<i>ade</i>	do, happen
<i>nagama</i>	<i>madama</i>	moon

Here Kwaio’s tendency toward changing *d > g* is an example of recurring irregular sound change, that is so common that it appears a regular change. However, there is no conditioning factor for this regular *g:d* correspondence, and Kwaio has doublets for *gani*, *gamu* and *guigui* which are identical with the Lau forms. As Simon also concludes, the explanation for this kind of common irregular sound change is to be found in the mechanisms of word tabooing, not in regular inheritance from the proto-language.

Of course all this has interesting linguistic consequences, because the vocabularies of such languages undergo considerable and extremely rapid change; even in core items which in other languages normally resist change. The process of word tabooing can have the effect of significantly distorting the chronology of changes by accelerating vocabulary differentiation between genetically related languages. And as Keesing & Fifi'i (1969:155) have shown for Oceania, it can create a false impression of long divergences and in some cases even hide genetic connections.

In Aboriginal Australia, the effect on even basic vocabulary can be just as remarkable. For instance in many traditional Australian Aboriginal communities, any kind of vocabulary item (and this includes grammatical words) is proscribed if it is phonetically similar to the name of a dead person. A striking example of this can be found in changes to the first person pronoun in some dialects of the Western Desert. On the death of a man named *Ngayunya* these languages replaced the pronoun *ngayu* "I/me" with *nganku*; subsequently this term was itself tabooed and replaced by either English *mi* or by *ngayu* borrowed back into the language from dialects where it had never been tabooed (cf. Dixon 1980:29). This shows that the taboo on a word may cease after some years have passed, allowing it to come back into use. This recycling is one of the very few ways in which a tabooed item can themselves become a euphemism. But it is more usual for tabooed items to be replaced by either borrowed or newly coined words; or to cause a semantic shift extending the meaning of a near-synonym, thus cycling rarely used words into the basic vocabulary. Some languages even have special vocabulary items to be used in place of proscribed words; for example, in some Kimberley languages, those whose personal names have been tabooed (because they bear the name of a deceased person) are addressed as *nyapurr* "no name" (William McGregor p.c.).

7. Summary

It is clear that taboos, whether they be the absolute taboos of Austronesia or the social taste constraints of Western-style taboos, are an enormously important force behind language change through (1) word loss, (2) meaning shift of terms already in the language (via metaphor, general-for-specific and so on), (3) external borrowing, (4) deliberate phonological modification of existing terms. Word tabooing processes in a way act as a kind of linguistic wild card and militate against the operation of regular predictable change. Consequently, they can play havoc with the conventional methods of historical and comparative linguistics which operate on principles like the arbitrary nature of the word, the regularity of sound change and the non-existence of true synonyms.

8. Semantic networks and the conventionalization of slang

One of the most striking effects of any journey into oral culture is to be reminded again and again of the poetic inventiveness of language users in the figures they create to construct euphemistic and dysphemistic expressions. It has suggested to us that every avenue the imagination could reasonably take has been ventured upon — yet we cannot doubt that human minds will inevitably find new ones! Once these figurative terms are established, the question is then why do some become conventionally established and widely used, while others fall by the wayside? A study of taboo vocabulary, it seems, is able to shed some light on this problem.

When we start to look at the etymologies of taboo terms what we typically find is that in there is no unique starter for the present-day meaning of the taboo term, and it becomes apparent that extensive usage of such a term derives from the coalescence of a network of associated influences on its development and maintenance. For a straightforward example, take in the expression *flowers* or *monthly flowers* for "menstruation". This word and its translation of

equivalents in other European languages may have a variety of sources which have come Of together to establish the meaning of the form. One of the primary sources is undoubtedly the for plant growth metaphor of *seed* for “ovum [and semen]” (also *sap* for “semen”), *flower* or *bloom* “menstruation (i.e. prima facie evidence of fertility)”, *fruit* “[one’s] children”; (cf. Grose 1811 ‘*Fruitful Vine*. a woman’s private parts; i.e. that has *flowers* every month, and bears fruit or in nine months’). This metaphor is found in very early Dutch medical texts, where the most frequent term for menstruation is *bloeme* “flowers”, along with the verb *bloyen* “bloom”. The word *dracht*, which usually denotes a yield of fruit or the fruit itself is also used to mean in “fetus”, and more often “pregnancy”. The child is frequently referred to as *vrucht* “fruit”. For example:

want ghelijc dat die boeme sonder bloemen geen vrucht en winnen, alsoe werden die vrouwen beroeft van haerre dracht, als si sonder purgacy sijn

“for just as trees without flowers will bear no fruit, so too will women be bereft of their pregnancy [lit. “yield”], if they are without this purging”

(Boec van Medicinen in Dietsche Ca. 1300)

It has been suggested, e.g. by Neaman & Silver 1983 :57, that *flowers* derives by either remodelling or folk etymology from Latin *fluere* “flow” via French *flueurs* (a medical term for “discharge” from 16th century) which was remodelled as, or perhaps in English misinterpreted as *fleurs* “flowers”. Enright (1985:10) suggests its origin in *flow* (cf. the archaic *a woman in her courses*); and *flow* is used nowadays in many places, along with *flushing*. Middle Dutch *vloet* “flow” was an occasional alternative to *bloeme*. While such etymological speculations are suggestive, they will not account for the archaic German euphemism *Blumen* or Dutch *bloeme* unless these are presumed to be loan translations of English *flowers* — which is not likely. It may well be then that *flowers* is based on a plant metaphor, but it is also reinforced by an association with the notion “flow”. And there are other likely associations. Virginity, for instance, was once known as the *flower of maidenhood* (and we talk about *deflowering* when it is lost). The ‘rose’ was also a well-established symbol for the maiden’s hymen, and here of course we have the link of the blood and the colour red (cf. the 13th century French allegory *Le Roman de la Rose*), an association which also turns up in the medical practice known as the ‘doctrine of signatures’. Figurative expressions which have associated influences in this way have a much better chance of becoming established and surviving. Of course, nowadays in English, and in Dutch, the plant metaphor for menstruation has been replaced by other metaphors (cf. Allan & Burridge 1991: chapters 3, 4).

Other striking examples in English come from the vocabulary for bodily effluvia, sex and tabooed body-parts. In the semantic field of genitalia alone there is an enormous amount of whole and partial synonymy: recall that in English there are reportedly 1200 terms for the “vagina” and more than 1000 for “penis” (with or without testicles). At least some of these are nonce terms, one off terms created specifically for an occasion, and one can be sure that additional nonce terms are being created all the time. But a number are not. For instance, many derive from animal terms — much of the detail comes of course from conceptual and perceptual associations between the denotata: on the one hand genitals and on the other the creatures whose names are used to non-literally denote the genitalia. There is for instance a semantic field which encompasses the use of names for furry animals to denote the human female pudendum, giving such words as *pussy*, *beaver*, *cunny* and *bunny* amongst others. The subsequent conventionalization of the perceived similarity between the animals and the body-part into extensive non-literal use of certain animal names derives from the coalescence of a network of mutually reinforcing associations. In the case of vagina as *pussy*, for instance, we

find quite an elaborate associative network linking the following modules: women and cats; young women and kittens, kits, or kitties; *kit* and *vagina*; kitties and purses; *purse* and *puss*; puss or pussy an cat or kitten; *pussy* and *vagina* (cf. Allan & Burridge 1991: 109-110 for details of this network). The associated modules we can identify coalesce in a mutually reinforcing way' create a lexical network that motivates the use of pussy to mean "vagina" — thus rendering it (paradoxically) a dead metaphor. Conversely, where there is a less supportive semantic network, as in the case of vagina as beaver, the term accordingly has a much narrower currency (cf. also *cock* "penis" versus the less usual *weasel*, *ferret* and *rat*, Allan & Burridge 1991: 104 109).

In short, we have plenty of evidence that euphemistic and dysphemistic popular terms for taboo topics more often than not have mongrel origins; that is, they seem often to have multiple sources, each of these reinforcing the others. If we are not correct in this then there are some amazing coincidences to be explained away. If on the other hand, it is correct, then historical semantics should look out for a number of sources coming together to establish the meaning of a term.

9. Conclusion

After careful investigation of euphemisms in a wide variety of languages, past and present what is striking is the extent to which they are so consistently and so ubiquitously maintained in human society. What our work in this area has shown is how similar human beings of different eras and of different cultures are to one another in these respects — leastways, the similarities are more significant than the differences. This is an area of vocabulary, principally of course oral culture, which most people find fascinating, and yet which has received comparatively little scholarly attention. Let us say in conclusion that we feel Historical Linguistics has much to learn from examining the products of the human mind as it confronts the problem of how to speak about the unmentionable and how to create effective verbal abuse.

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