

Taboo, censoring and the human brain

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Backdrop—taboo, censoring and X-phemism

In its conception, as originally borrowed from Tongan, the word *taboo* refers to forbidden behaviour; it is forbidden because it is behaviour believed to be dangerous to certain individuals or to the society as a whole. The most serious taboos apply to things thought to be ominous, evil, or offensive to supernatural powers. To violate such taboos automatically causes harm (even death) to the violator and perhaps their fellows. In this context, euphemism (Greek *eu* 'good, well' and *phēmē* 'speaking') can be quite literally a matter of life or death. However, taboos do not always involve the possibility of physical or metaphysical injury. Old Polynesia supplied evidence of the sorts of taboos on bad manners which readers will experience in their everyday lives—taboos that are merely social sanctions placed on behaviour that is regarded as distasteful or impolite within a given social context. Many taboos of contemporary Western society are of this nature. They rest ultimately on traditions of etiquette and are therefore defined by culturally sensitive social parameters such as age, sex, education, social status and the like. A taboo word in today's English is avoided—that is to say censored out of use on a particular occasion—not because of any fear that physical harm may befall either the speaker or the audience (though for some people metaphysical harm is still a possibility if religious sensibilities are transgressed), but lest the speaker lose face by offending the sensibilities of the audience. Whether you speak of *micturating*, *powdering your nose*, *going to the washroom*, *taking a leak*, *a pee* or *a piss*, the choice is a matter of appropriate style. Such taboos may be observed in private but they are strongest in the public domain. In this context euphemism is the polite thing to do, and offensive language (or dysphemism) breaks social convention. As social beings, humans can ill afford to violate social conventions without suffering adverse sanctions. We therefore censor our behaviour so as to avoid giving offence except when we deliberately intend to offend.

We distinguish an individual's *censoring* of language from institutional and public *ensorship* of language. All normal individuals censor their own language (and other behaviour) constantly: they sometimes consciously but mostly unconsciously choose between such alternatives as *Going to the bathroom* and *Going for a piss*, saying *Holy shit!* or *Gosh!* One of the reasons that political correctness has been so successful in getting people to change their linguistic behaviour is that it has created a climate of tacit censorship. Speakers who use non-PC terms run the risk of being lumped together with true bigots with malevolent motives. The safest course of action is to be PC. In the long run, censorship is probably only ever effective when it coincides with what individuals would choose to censor for themselves—hence the comparative success of non-discriminatory language guidelines.

In contemporary Western society taboo and euphemism are closely entwined with concepts of politeness and face (basically, a person's self image). Generally, social interaction is oriented towards behaviour that is courteous and respectful, or at least inoffensive. Participants have to consider whether what they are saying will maintain, enhance or damage their own face, as well as be considerate of and care for the face needs of others. We define euphemism as 'an alternative to a dispreferred expression', namely an expression that is not desired or appropriate on a given occasion. Typically the dispreferred expression denotes a taboo topic, and so might alternatively be called a *taboo term*. A speaker (or writer) uses a euphemism to escape disapproval and to avoid offending the hearer (or reader) or often some third party (maybe a bystander). Some speakers even claim that the obnoxious nature of taboo terms offends their own sensibilities.

Euphemisms then are the product of a human mind confronting the problem of how to talk in different contexts about things that for one reason or another the speaker would prefer not to speak of unrestrainedly in the prevailing context. They result from the censoring of language; though only rarely arise from the censorship of language. Examples are wide-ranging: medieval Dutch physicians used to write of *figs in the secret passage* to denote *piles*; the nineteenth century Victorian moral code created negative words such as *inexpressibles*, *unmentionables* and *unhintables* so that those in polite society could avoid uttering *legs*, *trousers* and *underclothing*; some people still say *crumbs* instead of *Christ*; many newspapers still print *c**** and *f****; politicians speak of *community charges*, *levies* or even *voluntary contributions* rather than of *taxes* or *tolls*; *prairie oysters*, *mountain oysters* and *fry* sound more appetising than *calf's testicles*; *lemon fish* and *flake* far tastier than *shark*; companies *downsize*, *rightsize*, or implement an *RIF* (reduction in force) through *targeted voluntary separation* or *involuntary resignation*; the push for non-sexist usage has rendered words like *chairman* and *actress* taboo for some people. Not all euphemisms are in response to taboo, however. In their ability to place whatever it is they designate in a favourable light, many are simply alternatives for expressions speakers prefer not to use on a given occasion. Clause 28 of the Melbourne Metropolitan Planning Scheme makes several references to the *accommodation of stationary vehicles*.¹ For the writer of this document this phrase presumably has more positive connotations, or at least fewer negative connotations, than either *parking places* or *car spaces*. Such euphemisms are positive expressions that are used to enhance whatever is being referred to, perhaps even to amuse. They have no real taboo counterparts—*potholes* are simply upgraded to *pavement deficiencies*, *dried beans* to *Alaskan strawberries*.

From the earliest periods in history, themes such as private parts, bodily functions, sex, lust, anger, notions of social status, hate, dishonesty, drunkenness, madness, disease, death, dangerous animals, fear and God have inspired taboos and inhibitions, such that there has been considerable impact from censoring discussion of them. Taboo is dynamic, though, and notions about what is forbidden will change, sometimes dramatically, across cultures and across time. Since the 1980s, English



speakers have shown a growing apprehensiveness of how to talk to and about those perceived to be disadvantaged or oppressed. There has been a gradual establishment of legally recognised sanctions against what might be described as *-IST language*. The new taboos make sexist, racist, ageist, religiousist, and so on. language not only contextually dysphemistic, but also legally so. The *-IST* taboos have surpassed in significance irreligious profanity, blasphemy and sexual obscenity, against which laws have been relaxed. Individual societies also differ with respect to the degree of tolerance shown towards any sort of taboo-defying behaviour. This depends on their values and belief systems at the particular time in history. It was not so long ago that transgressions against some Western taboos were very severely punished; for instance, in Britain up until the end of the seventeenth century, blasphemy was punishable by burning.

Whereas the term euphemism is well-known and has wide currency, dysphemism (Greek *dys-* 'bad, unfavourable') rarely appears in ordinary language. Like euphemism it is sometimes motivated by fear and distaste, but also by hatred and contempt. Speakers resort to dysphemism to talk about people and things that frustrate and annoy them, that they disapprove of and wish to disparage, humiliate and degrade. Dysphemistic expressions therefore include curses, name-calling and any sort of derogatory comment directed towards others in order to insult or to wound them. Dysphemism is also the result of letting off steam—using exclamatory swearwords to release frustration or anger. Like euphemism, dysphemism interacts with style and has the potential to produce stylistic discord; if, for instance, someone at a formal dinner party were to publicly announce *I'm off for a piss* rather than saying *Excuse me for a moment*, the effect would be dysphemistic.

The concepts of euphemism and dysphemism imply the presence of direct terms that are neither sweet-sounding, evasive, overly polite (euphemistic), nor harsh, blunt, offensive (dysphemistic). Such expressions we call *orthophemisms* (Greek *ortho-* 'proper, straight, normal'). As alternatives to offensive expressions, orthophemisms, like euphemisms, will typically be preferred as desirable or appropriate terms. Examples of all three kinds of language expressions would be *pass away* (typically a euphemism), *snuff it* (typically a dysphemism) and *die* (typically an orthophemism). However, these descriptions are problematic since what determines them is a set of social attitudes or conventions that may vary considerably between dialect groups and even between individual members of the same community. Given there is such complexity and variety of opinions and attitudes, we are unlikely to ever find uniformity of judgement between speakers of even very similar social backgrounds. There can be no such thing as 'Everyman's euphemism' or 'Everyman's dysphemism'. X-phemisms (members of the union set of euphemisms, orthophemisms and dysphemisms) are primarily determined from evaluating an expression within the particular context in which it is uttered. For example, the verb *die* is direct and in some contexts might well be the neutral and mundane orthophemism. However, in another more personal context it might also conjure up an image that some



people find just too blunt. On that occasion it would be offensive and dysphemistic. On the other hand, an expression like *snuff it* or *croak* can also be euphemistic between certain individuals; its flippancy detracts from the seriousness of death, which makes it preferable to a more direct term like *die*. A jocular approach to death is offensive only if it can be expected that the hearer would regard it as such.

Even though the choice between alternative expressions will always depend upon context, it would be true to say that ordinary people do perceive expressions to be somehow intrinsically either orthophemistic, euphemistic, or dysphemistic. For example, terms for *die* such as *pass away* and *sleep* are euphemistic, whereas *croak*, *snuff it* and *peg out* are not. In the British survey Millwood-Hargrave (2000), participants were asked to respond to the perceived 'strength' of twenty-eight swearwords. No context was provided; yet they were clear about the severity of such words and the researchers were able to put together a broad topography of swearwords across all groups. In Allan and Burrige (2006) we link the default evaluation of expressions as euphemistic, dysphemistic or orthophemistic—the kind of evaluation made in some dictionaries—to the Middle Class Politeness Criterion (MCPC): what would be considered the polite form when addressing a casual acquaintance of the opposite sex in a formal situation in a middle class environment. The *Encarta World English Dictionary* recognises three degrees of offensiveness: 'insulting', 'offensive' and 'taboo'. Out of context, this sort of sensitive handling employs a type of good etiquette gauge by which is determined the X-phemistic value of an expression without reference to the particular context of use. Those who produce collections of euphemisms and dysphemisms, such as Ayto (1993) and Green (1996), also base their collections on the prejudiced social attitudes to the situation in which they believe a given expression is uttered. What is envisaged is the MCPC. The MCPC is automatically assumed in the public domain, where the exact composition of an audience is not known. Etiquette demands that, in this context, language be chosen carefully and consciously with a respectable mixed gender middle class audience in mind.

The euphemism mill: word taboo and the naturalist hypothesis

Words are symbolic. Despite the fact that every language has some vocabulary based on sound symbolism (for example, *clang*, *jangle*, *woosh*), the correlation between the form and the meaning of a language expression is arbitrary—there is no natural and no necessary connection between the physical shape of a word and what it denotes. Individual sounds (for example, /e/, /p/, /n/) do not have meaning—'that which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet'. Shakespeare was correct, but language users do not behave as if he was. They are constantly on the look-out for some sort of meaningful connection between the sound of a word and what is being referred to. Meaning is shifted because of the way the word sounds. For many, the word *flagrant* now describes 'the way flowers smell' (the result of a blend between



fl-ower and *fr-agrant*). Speakers might also perceive a similarity between forms on the basis of meaning and then change the forms so that they are pronounced alike. For example, the regular processes of sound change would have shifted Modern English *groin* to something like *grine*; but the word was altered to *groin* to be more like *loin*. The sounds used to denote certain phenomena start off being arbitrary, but over time this arbitrariness can fall away. In the case of taboo words, the link made between sound and sense is particularly strong; speakers really do behave as if somehow the form of the expression communicates the essential nature of whatever it represents (*'Cunt' is such a horrible word!*).

More generally the belief in the potency of words has been dubbed the naturalist hypothesis;² to quote Sir James Frazer (1911: 318) '... 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'. The naturalist hypothesis forms the very basis for the distinction between the mentionable euphemism, on the one hand, and an unmentionable taboo alternative. Why would euphemistic expressions such as *vagina* and *excrement* have fewer unpleasant connotations, than their taboo synonyms *cunt* and *shit*? The taboo terms have been contaminated by the taboo concepts they represent. Yet, the obscenity lies in the actual words themselves— what they connote—and not in what they denote. This is why taboo words are often described as unpleasant or ugly-sounding and why they are miscalled *dirty words*. These words are felt to be intrinsically nasty and that makes them disturbing. Indeed, in the next section we shall see that ability of forbidden words to 'chill the blood and raise gooseflesh', to quote Henry Wyld (1936: 387), is now scientifically confirmed.

Such is the potency of taboo terms that innocent vocabulary may also be affected through spurious association. *Regina* makes some people feel uncomfortable because of its phonetic similarity to *vagina*, and they avoid it. Phonetic proximity to *fuck* puts a constraint on the use of *suck* in polite society. However, the censoring of *suck* is strengthened by the fact that since the 1920s it has been used for *fellatio* and since the 1970s in homophobic inspired expressions for 'something contemptible or disgusting', as in *School sucks!*. *Coney* (rhymes with honey) meaning 'rabbit' dropped out of use when it took on inappropriate anatomical significance. Similarly, when *arse* collided with *ass* this caused problems for *ass donkey*, which is now avoided by many English speakers. Some still use *cock* to mean *rooster*, but its identity with the name of the tabooed body part is killing off the *rooster* sense. Gender, sexuality, disability and especially race are now so highly-charged that speakers will shun anything that may be interpreted as discriminatory or pejorative—and this includes blameless bystanders that get in the way. The word *niggardly* has no etymological connections with the taboo term *nigger*; yet many Americans now censor out the expression. The effects of taboo commonly cross language boundaries, too. Thais are apprehensive about using the Thai word *fuk* 'gourd, pumpkin' in the hearing of English speakers; they also avoid the English word *yet* because of its phonetic resemblance to



the offensive colloquial Thai verb *fuck*. Many other peoples practise similar self-censoring under multilingual conditions.

The English words *titivate* and *titillate* illustrate another effect of taboo. The two similar-sounding words are currently in the process of colliding. *Titivate* originally meant 'to tidy up', but some dictionaries give the additional meaning (usually labelled 'incorrect') 'tickle, excite agreeably'. *Titivate* is taking on the meaning of similar-sounding *titillate* meaning 'to excite pleasantly' (with strong association to lust). The fact the first syllable is *tit-* may also play a part. We should not be surprised that *titillate* wins out over *titivate*; risqué meanings will always come to dominate. Economics has Gresham's Law: 'Bad money drives out good.' Sociology now has Knight's Law: 'Bad talk drives out good.' Linguistics has the Allan-Burridge Law of Semantic Change: 'Bad connotations drive out good.'

The effect of this law is that many euphemisms become tainted over time as the negative associations reassert themselves and undermine the euphemistic quality of the word. For example, such is the stigma surrounding mental illness that any euphemism for the condition will quickly degenerate into dysphemism. The word *insanity* derives from Latin *in-* 'not' + *sanus* 'healthy'. Now confined to 'mentally unsound', it originally had a much broader domain encompassing all bodily organs and their functions. Today even the word *sane* has narrowed under the influence of *insane* to designate a mental condition only. *Crazy* was once applicable to all manner of illness, but is now also restricted to mental illness alone. The history of the word *deranged* illustrates a typical path of development for euphemisms. Originally from a verb meaning 'to disturb, disarrange', it could be qualified with the modifier *mental* to refer to 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 has narrowed to the 'mad' sense alone. The adjective *mental* has also been affected. Dictionaries still list 'pertaining to the mind' as its central sense, but 'denoting a disorder of the mind' is always given as a secondary meaning, as are colloquial senses 'mad' and 'foolish' (compare *be/go mental* and *become a mental patient*). There are signs 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. And while dictionaries define *sick* as 'affected by any disorder of health', in slang usage the word has narrowed to 'mental ill-health', frequently with overtones of 'perversion' (compare *sicko* and *sicknik*).

Taboo areas of the lexicon perpetually generate this sort of narrowing and deterioration of meaning. The result is a constant turnover of vocabulary for words denoting taboo concepts. Very few euphemisms that have degraded in this way into taboo terms come back from the abyss, even after they have lost their taboo sense. This promotes an X-phemism mill. And the more severe the taboo, the more rapid the turnover. For example, the vocabulary for bodily effluvia, sex, and tabooed body parts manifests significantly more synonymy than one encounters anywhere else in the English lexicon. Here we are dealing with literally thousands



Camperdown Mental Health Service
Aboriginal Mental Health Unit

of X-phemisms. Lexical richness is always a key to understanding society's preoccupations, and it is striking that over the years English has accumulated more than 1000 expressions for *penis*, 1200 for the *vagina*, 800 for *copulation* and an extraordinary 2,000 expressions for *wanton woman*.³ Given these figures it does seem curious that people are always so fascinated by the myth that Eskimo languages have hundreds of different words for *snow* (in fact they don't);⁴ yet English speakers seem totally unaware, or else they just overlook, the lexical abundance that lies right under their noses.

Raising gooseflesh: extra-linguistic evidence

We have presented plenty of linguistic evidence for the emotional quality of taboo expressions. Even across languages these words seem able to contaminate other words, bringing down innocent expressions that just happen to sound similar. Moreover, taboo senses seem to have a saliency that will dominate and eventually kill off all other senses belonging to any language expression recruited as euphemism. In this next section we examine some of the findings from other fields of research that shed light on this striking behaviour. Psychological, physiological and neurological studies all corroborate that forbidden words are more arousing, more shocking, more memorable and more evocative than all other language stimuli. We will outline some of the most important research here; but see Allan and Burrige (2006: Chapter 12) for further studies.

In 1957 Charles Osgood and his colleagues provided psycholinguistic support for the Allan–Burrige Law of Semantic Change and the X-phemism mill. Their now famous study outlines a technique, the 'semantic differential', for systematically (though subjectively) quantifying connotative meaning. People were asked to evaluate numerous words and phrases on a series of seven-point bipolar rating scales. The aim was to locate a concept in semantic space within three dimensions of attitude: evaluation (is the word good or bad); activity (is the word active or passive); potency (is the word strong or weak). Their research confirmed what we know from the behaviour of words over time: that there is a general tendency for any derogatory or unfavourable denotation or connotation within a language expression to dominate the interpretation of its immediate context.

A number of experiments measure the emotional impact of words using techniques such as electrodermal monitoring (a kind of polygraph). This records 'skin conductance responses' (or 'galvanic skin responses'). Research supports overwhelmingly what every native speaker knows: 'dirty' words compared to other words cause bigger goosebumps; that is, evoke stronger skin conductance responses.⁵ Over the years this research has also looked into the effects of arousal on memory. The findings are always the same: taboo words are more stimulating than non-taboo words and we appear to store them differently in memory. Using natural conversation, Brian MacWhinney and others (1982) found excellent recognition memory for the surface structure and content of profane and sexually suggestive language. (Unfortunately, the study was bowdlerised:



though we learn a lot about people's memory and awareness of this 'off-color' language, we never actually see examples of the 'high interactional content sentences' that served as stimuli. A nice example of euphemistic omission!)

The results showed that those 12 high interactional content sentences with profane and sexually suggestive language elicited responses quite different from those elicited by the remaining 44 high interactional content sentences. [...] Sentences with off-color language possess a memorability that is quite independent of their role in a conversation.

(MacWhinney, Keenan et al. 1982: 315)

A 2004 report by MacKay and colleagues describes the effects of emotion on memory and attention using what is known as a Stroop task. Taboo words were displayed in a salient colour, and participants were asked to name the colour and ignore the word. There were three significant effects. Participants were slower in naming the colour of the taboo words compared to the colour of the neutral words; we infer that they were distracted by the disturbing nature of taboo words. Interestingly, this effect diminished with word repetition—which is consistent with the fact that the affective power of frequently encountered words wears out. The second effect was superior recall of taboo words in surprise memory tests following colour naming. The third effect was better recognition memory for those colours consistently associated with taboo words rather than with neutral words. Other experiments have demonstrated that taboo words impair immediate recall of the preceding and succeeding words in rapidly presented lists. All these findings are consistent with the strong emotional reactions triggered by culturally potent taboo expressions.

A slightly different perspective is provided by experiments that examine the emotional responsiveness of bilingual speakers. For example, a study reported by Harris and colleagues of 32 English-Turkish bilinguals used fingertip electrodes to measure the emotional responses of participants to taboo and other kinds of highly charged words. Researchers found that the greatest emotional reactivity was to taboo words in both languages. Consistent with earlier studies using only monolingual speakers, taboo words (curses, bawdy body part and sexual terms) generated far stronger responses measured by amplitude of skin conductance than other kinds of emotional words such as reprimands (*Don't do that!*), aversive words (*cancer, kill, death*), positive words (*bride, joy, kind*) and neutral words. In fact, the amplitude was almost double that of neutral words. The responses were even stronger for the speaker's first language. These findings support what second language speakers have often reported anecdotally; namely, that they find it easier to utter taboo words in their second language than their first. Moreover, they are far less self-conscious when discussing taboo topics in their second language. This study also recorded that the auditory stimuli elicited greater emotional arousal than the visual stimuli in the first but not in the second language. In other words, the sound of taboo words was found to be more disturbing than their appearance in print, once more confirming the subjective reports of language users generally: *dirty words sound awful and are much harder to say than to write.*



But why would the language learned early in life, especially emotive expressions such as dirty words, elicit stronger physiological responses than language learned later in life? When we learn taboo words at a young impressionable age, they are presumably coded with the equivalent of a linguistic health warning: DANGEROUS—USE ONLY WITH EXTREME CAUTION. Children acquire the emotive components of the meaning of these words very early on, before they have knowledge of the social and cultural pressures that require us to censor them.⁶ Taboo words come with social rewards (maximum attention) and penalties (reprimands, banishments). Here is Miss A. M. Miller (born 1906) recalling her childhood experience, a startlingly literal enactment of the dirt metaphor for taboo:

When my brother Roy was a little boy – on this occasion I was undressing him to put him to bed – and I said, ‘I’m a duffer, I didn’t take your bodice off before I put your pyjamas top on,’ and he said, ‘Well, take my bloody bodice off.’ And mother went into the bathroom and she came out with a cake of soap, and pulled his tongue out and slithered it up and down his tongue. The poor kid. He was like someone having a fit. The soap was foaming all over the place. [interviewed 1978 by Moya Gunn of La Trobe University]

As our brain systems mature and we develop discretion about what we say, we learn to censor taboo words via the usual neurological processes of inhibition. Taboo words and phrases acquired by late bilinguals lack the cultural imprint of the forbidden and have different neurological representations. In fact, a number of participants in the Harris et al. experiment, during the debriefing sessions, reported they ‘felt nothing’ when they heard or even uttered the taboo expressions in their second language.

The processing of the emotional components of language, such as taboo words, belongs to the limbic system. This is an older deeper part of the mammalian midbrain (about the size of a walnut) that adds emotional spice to the surrounding cerebral cortex—the part of the brain that is responsible for verbal reasoning, calculation, analytical thinking and rational thought. Bilingual studies suggest that first language acquisition may involve the subcortical limbic area, while second language acquisition, at least for late bilinguals, may depend more on the later-developing cortical area. Interesting in this regard is that fact that cerebral imaging using Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) and Positron Emission Tomography (PET) has demonstrated that second languages are stored in different places in the brain depending on the age at which the languages have been acquired. Using MRI scanning techniques, Kim and colleagues discovered that native and second languages acquired during the early acquisition period are represented in common frontal cortical areas, whereas second languages acquired as an adult are spatially separated from native languages. This explains why most people who acquire a second language never attain native-like fluency.

Neurological and psychiatric disorders shed additional light on the neural architecture that underpins the production and control of taboo expressions. People with certain kinds of dementia and/or aphasia lose all



language ability except the ability to produce dirty words.⁷ The technical term for the involuntary utterance of obscene language is *coprolalia* (from Greek *kopros* 'dung' and *lalia* 'talk'). It is related to the variety of highly emotional language that we automatically produce when we are angry and frustrated, under pressure, or in sudden pain. People who manifest this kind of disorder curse profusely, producing what sound like exclamatory interjections as an emotional reaction. However, if 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 from other language.

Further evidence linking taboo language to the limbic system (the emotional processing areas) comes from people manifesting *Gilles de la Tourette's Syndrome* (TS), a neurological disorder associated with frequent and repetitive involuntary vocal tics (utterances of noises or words) and motor tics (muscle movements). Among the range of symptoms is *coprolalia*. The following are responses (by sufferers of TS or close relatives) to a Web Forum maintained by the Department of Neurology at Massachusetts General Hospital.⁸ (Note that the typos are original.)

Uttering unacceptable words causes a delicious reaction in others which makes the utterer the centre of attention. Perhaps this is initially an attention seeking device which becomes habit and part of normal speech when the person doesn't notice the difference between acceptable and unacceptable. My son went through a phase of muttering 's--t' all the time which passed after a while when we ceased to show that we were outraged. Of course another tic took over...

(May 25, 1999)

My 5 yr old daughter suffers from coprolalia. She has no idea what the words mean. In fact, I believe coprolalia has almost nothing to do with linguistics or language. It has to do with socially inappropriate noises — some of which happen to be words. [...] If whistling the national anthem were considered the most appalling aural insult in western society my daughter would be doing that as a tic and not swearing. Society shapes the noise that is made, and at this end of the 20th century, it shapes it into swearing.

(May 11, 1999)

It seems that the obscenities associated with this behavioural disorder involve whatever is most socially inappropriate for the time. The first response quoted is interesting in that the young boy stopped saying *shit* when he failed to get any sort of reaction. There is one case of a nine-year-old boy who lost his coprolalia entirely when he was told the words he was uttering were not obscene. A bilingual English-Spanish speaker reportedly switched the language of his outbursts depending on the language being spoken around him.⁹ The parent in the second response quoted above expressed it all quite plainly: if whistling the national anthem were considered shocking, their Touretter daughter would be



doing it as a tic. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that the symptoms of TS also vary widely from culture to culture.¹⁰ Presumably, too, in earlier times, people manifesting forms of madness attributed to diabolical possession or sorcery were often people with TS. These days religious profanity and blasphemy have given way to sexually obscene words and, commonly, racial epithets. One woman married to a man with TS felt that coprolalia was specifically something that affected an area of the brain designed to store hostile reactions toward some perceived group of 'others'; she concluded 'I think that is why racial epithets are so sadly a part of coprolalia for many people.'¹¹

A number of researchers have characterised TS as a breakdown of the brain's inhibitory mechanisms. There is a substantial body of data based on postmortem and neuroimaging studies that implicates the basal ganglia (the interconnected areas of grey matter located deep below the cerebral cortex) in both TS and related neurological disorders.¹² These basal ganglia are the hidden pathways that contribute to the multiple circuits involved in the different cognitive and limbic processes that regulate emotions, thoughts, and movement; neurologists have associated TS with a failure to suppress subsets of these mini-circuits.¹³ For example, the outbursts of foul language would be associated with a failure to inhibit portions of the limbic mini-circuits. There may not yet be any laboratory or neuroimaging studies that have conclusively identified the exact neuroanatomical sites where taboo expressions are stored or that have evaluated specifically the neurological processing of obscenities, but the evidence seems overwhelming: taboo language is rooted deeply in human neural anatomy. The socio-cultural setting then provides the expression. 'Society shapes the noise that is made,' to quote the mother of the five- year-old Touretter.

In conclusion

Verbal taboos serve human interests by setting apart those things that threaten to cause distress and offence. Many have a rational basis: prohibitions against incest do help to prevent weakened progeny; sensible explanations can be found for most food preferences and avoidances; the bad smell theories of disease that held sway until the nineteenth century may have been built on fantasy and imagination yet we know that communities are far healthier if human waste is kept at a distance. However, taboos will also persist even when people are unaware of reasons that might have led to their establishment. Much of the time it is routine that ensures the continuance of linguistic sanctions. And taboos do increase group identity through feelings of distinctiveness; therefore they strengthen the social fabric. Moreover, the rites and rituals that accompany them give us a sense of control in a chaotic and hostile environment. As Mary Douglas (1966) saw it, the distinction between cleanliness and filth stems from the basic human need to structure the world around us and render it understandable. When old taboos are jettisoned people grow anxious that disorder is setting in.

There are, of course, occasions when we happily defy taboos and their purifying impetus, when censoring, public or private, is thrown to the wind.



There is the straightforward pleasure of transgression: it is liberating to defy prohibition by violating linguistic taboos. There is also a psychological gain in letting off steam and expressing extreme emotion when expletives, forbidden words, automatically come tumbling out. And not surprisingly many societies have public acts of ceremonial misbehaviour to function as a social safety valve. Flyting, the dozens, celebrity roasts and other kinds of competitive ritual insulting apparently manifest such a function. Then there is the obvious link between hostility and forbidden words in curses, name-calling, derogatory comments directed towards someone else to insult or to wound them. Taboo words used among an in-group are a display of solidarity—especially when directed against out-groupers. Like the ‘incorrect’ language of non-standard grammar, taboo words fall outside what is good and proper, and they help to define the gang. Thus they can be a sign of endearment (G’day you old bastard), or a part of steamy pillow talk. And they are an important component in joke-telling. Humour involves all sorts of things that speakers generally do not cope with, and it provides one of the main ritual contexts for taboo violation today.

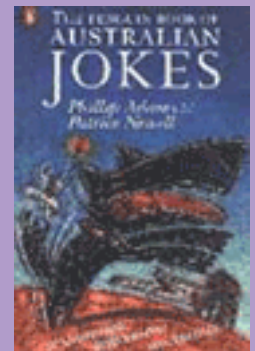
Jokes [...] are appalling. Almost without exception they deal in bigotry, sexism, racism, ageism and all the other politically incorrect isms. They clearly help people deal with their deep distaste for their own sexuality, their excremental functions, their foreign neighbours, their political masters and an infinite variety of things that go bump in the night.

(Adams and Newell 1994: 12)

Given all these benefits, it is hardly surprising to find that taboo words are located in a special place within our brains. And not surprisingly too, attempts to stamp them out meet with such little success. Bad language is not just some nasty habit that we can be broken of, like smoking in restaurants, or nail-biting. In fact, it is quite apparent that the forbidden words flourish all the more vigorously on a diet of individual censoring and public disapproval. Linguistic prohibition, like other kinds of prohibition and censorship, is doomed to failure in the longer term. These days next to public PC etiquette there is a thriving lexicon of bigotry. In this era of right-wing religious bigotry, the expansion of –IST dysphemisms heralds new formulae for abuse. To echo Shakespeare, like the worm in the bud, forbidden words thrive on censorship and decorum.

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Endnotes

1. Many thanks to Pia Herbert for supplying us with the relevant passages from the Melbourne Metropolitan Planning Scheme.
2. See Allan 2001.
3. Alan and Burridge 1991.
4. Pullum 1991.
5. It would be interesting to measure (using, say, electrodermal monitoring) the emotional impact of a wider range of forbidden language forms beyond the kinds of obscenity so far investigated; we have in mind, slipshod pronunciations, 'mistakes' in grammar, newfangled meanings, colloquialisms, jargon, clichés, new coinages, and so on. We guess that psychophysiological testing would show that an encounter with one of these irritating phrases not only activates their meaning, but also leads to emotional arousal. Speakers often describe expressions as getting up their nose, getting under their skin, getting on their nerves, turning their stomach, and so on. Irritating words, phrases, and grammatical constructions figuratively touch many parts of the anatomy and presumably this would be reflected in larger skin conductance amplitudes of a polygraph tracing.
6. Though see Jay 1992.
7. Jay 2000 offers a comprehensive account of the mental disorders associated with coprolalia and other coprophenomena.
8. http://neuro-www.mgh.harvard.edu/forum_2/TouretteSyndromeF/5.7.997.16PMCausesforcopr.html. Accessed October 2004.
9. These last two cases are discussed in Berecz 1992.
10. Jay 2000: 235–41.
11. Posted 18 May 1999.
12. Cf. neurolinguistic research by LaBar and Phelps 1998, Anderson and Phelps 2001 on the working of the brain's emotional systems.
13. Cf. James F. Leckman, Bradley S. Peterson & David L. Pauls, 2000. Tic Disorders. <http://www.acnp.org/g4/GN401000161/CH.html>. Jay 2000: 74 offers convincing evidence from a number of spheres for a 'cursing module' that is situated in the right hemisphere of the brain with interconnections to the amygdala and basal ganglia.

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