

THE GEOLINGUISTICS OF VERBAL TABOO

ALLEN WALKER READ

THE WORD *geolinguistics* may not be very familiar to a number of you in this audience and perhaps I should preface my remarks with a few words about this field. The initial exposition is to be found in Professor Mario Pei's book, *Invitation to Linguistics*, published in 1965. He introduced a tri-partite division into descriptive linguistics dealing with the synchronic analysis, and geolinguistics dealing with the relation of language to its speakers as they are spread over the world.

It has occurred to me, perhaps somewhat whimsically, that we might even have a pun here, that *geolinguistics* is *down-to-earth linguistics*. At least this is a fostering of certain concrete aspects of the field in contrast to the abstract and logicized approaches that are now very much in vogue. A full geolinguistics treatment of verbal taboo would involve an anthropological survey of its degree of prevalence in languages all over the world. It is part of our own culture's folklore that the observance of taboo represents refinement and cultivation but I suspect that the full survey would lead us to the opposite conclusion.

Verbal taboos are at work in several fields. The breaking of taboos relating to deity creates blasphemy and the breaking of taboos relating to death creates irreverence. Literally hundreds of euphemisms for death may be found. The late Professor Louise Pound collected them in a study of 1936 ranging from the high-flown literary to the flippant and vulgar. She recorded the legend about the rattled clergyman who said, pointing to the corpse, "*This is only the shell, the nut is gone.*"

The breaking of taboos relating to sex creates obscenity. If those taboos do not exist for you, then obscenity does not exist for you. The taboo is implanted in childhood experiences and it becomes deeply ingrained. I wrote about this back in 1934 in an article published in *American Speech*, and entitled "An Obscenity Symbol." In preparation for this speech this afternoon, I was rereading my article and it seemed to me that I could not express better what I think is at the heart of the verbal taboo than to quote a paragraph or two I wrote in that year, so I think I will read that from my own writing of 35 years ago.

Our feeling of the fearful thrill is the result of experiences during the impressionable age. The hushed awe that surrounds these words, the refusal of information concerning them, or the punishment meted out for an inadvertent use of them. There develops a neurosis so ingrained that the will is well-nigh powerless against it. Even when we come to know that there is not a proper basis for the feeling, we are prompted by motivations so deeply planted that we have the reactions in spite of our intellect.

The psychological motivation for taboo lies deep and probably has its root in the fear of the mysterious power of the sex impulse. Primitive man found that the force of passion could so disorder life that he hedged it about with interdicts and prohibitions. Because of these, sexual fetishes or symbols developed. For most people the bare word forms of these four-letter words have become sexual fetishes. The fact that only certain words are so regarded is attributable to the patterning tendency in man. If certain objects are arbitrarily designated as scapegoats then the remainders may be approached without fear.

That is why I have said that the four-letter words are not sub-standard even though they may rarely or never be externalized. They perform a function for speakers of Standard English by serving as scapegoats ministering to the deep-rooted need for symbols of the forbidden. They analyze a certain emotion and thus leave the remainder of the language free from it.

For the main part [of this paper] ... I will draw upon material that contrasts the usage of a set of stigmatized words in England and in America. This is specifically the *geolinguistic* aspect ... the study of regional differences in the feature of language. But in addition to the geographic differences, there are also differences in the time dimension: each era has its set of attitudes. We commonly speak of Victorian attitudes but I think that the height of the taboos were a little earlier than that. Eric Partridge believes that the height was in the 1830s and my own studies seem to bear this out. Queen Victoria did not ascend the throne until 1837.

We recall that before that, in 1834, Noah Webster had to cope with which words to include in an American dictionary and which to omit.

- He did not allow *teat* but substituted *breast*.
- He did not allow *womb* to appear in the text.
- *Stink* was cut out and he substituted *ill smell* and several other synonyms.
- *To give suck* was not allowed but *to nourish* was substituted.
- *Dung* had to go and *excrement* was used in its place.
- *Fornication* was not allowed, even the Latin derivative, but *lewdness* in that case was substituted.

Americans, I think, were sufficiently sophisticated that they realized things were going too far, so you do find satire on this tendency. In an American newspaper of 1840, I found the following passage, which seemed to indicate that even *oxtail* was considered indecent. This was the story of a man who mentioned oxtail soup and it caused the ladies at the table to flee from the room blushing. The diner apologized by saying,

“I am, however, sorry that it has given offense but I really do not know how I could have avoided it.”

“Then sir, I advise you when you have an occasion another time to speak of that particular soup do not call it *oxtail*.”

“No?”

“No.”

“But what shall I call it?”

“*Fly disperser*.”

“I shall remember that, *fly disperser* soup, you may rest assured.”

That cannot be believed, of course, but the satire of it shows the attitudes of the time.

We do find some people having the other attitude, however. Walt Whitman perhaps is the leader of that other school that had what I would think we would call a more wholesome attitude. Even in 1855, in the *American Primer*, he wrote as follows:

“The blank left by words wanted but unsupplied has sometimes an unnameably putrid cadaverous meaning. It talks louder than tongues. What a stinging taste is left in that literature and conversation where have not yet been served up by resistless consent, words to be freely used in rooms, at table and anywhere to specifically mean the act male and female.”

It took a long time to catch up with Whitman.

Some of the avoidances of the 1800s were really remarkable. It was taboo to say *pants* or even *trousers*, and the substitutes developed like *inexpressables* and *unmentionables*. This was one of the interests of Richard Thornton in his *American Glossary*. He has a whole page of such quotation that he collected from the nineteenth century. For instance:

- in 1824, from an Albany newspaper, “we thought about those *inexpressables* principally worn by our wives having been repaired.”
- in 1833, from the *American Monthly* magazine, “my *unmentionables* were somewhat endamaged.”
- from the *Knickerbocker Magazine* of 1837, “how could he see about procuring himself a pair of *unwhisperables*?”
- in 1848 from *Bacon’s Waggeries*, “Mr. B. dressed himself in a new bright blue coat and a pair of large and showy *unwhisperables*.”

In reading the letters of a soldier in the Union Army in 1864, I came across this sentence even in the writing of a soldier: “I concluded to peep into an out-building and who should I see but Mr. Johnny, just getting into his *don’t speak of ‘ems*.”

The taboo on the word *leg* was well established in New England in the eighteenth century. The earliest reference to that I found is in the year 1781 in Samuel Peters’ *General History of Connecticut*, in which he said, “it would be accounted the greatest rudeness for a gentleman to speak before a lady of a *garter* or a *leg*.”

The British travelers felt that there was a great deal of overwrought delicacy in American speech. Isaac Gindler, who came to this country in 1824, reported as follows: “what Englishman for example would have an idea there being any impropriety in remarking of a lady that she has a well-shaped ankle, yet this would be too gross for American ears, while to say that she has a handsome *leg* would be intolerable.”

The most outstanding story about *leg* was recorded by the British traveler Captain Frederick Marryat in 1839. He was traveling at Niagara Falls and reported this incident.

I was escorting a young lady with whom I was on friendly terms. She had been standing on a piece of rock the better to view the scene when she slipped skin. As she limped a little in walking home, I said, “Did you hurt your leg much?”

She turned from me evidently much shocked or much offended and not being aware that I had committed any heinous offense I begged to know what was the reason for her displeasure.

After some hesitation, she said as she knew me well she would tell me that the word *leg* was never mentioned before ladies.

I apologized for my want of refinement which was attributable to my having been accustomed only to English society and added that as such articles must occasionally be referred to even in the most polite circles in America, perhaps she would inform me by what name I might mention them without shocking the company.

Her reply was, that the word *limb* was used. “Nay,” continued she, “I am not so particular as some people are for I know those who would always say *limb* of a table or *limb* of a pianoforte.”

There were some remarkable substitutes developed for the word *leg*. Longfellow, in a novel in 1849, mentioned that a private school had among its rules “Young ladies are not allowed to cross their *benders* in school.” A traveler reported that you could not speak at the dinner table in a public restaurant of a *leg* of a chicken, you had to say the *first or second joint*. And the word *wires* had some currency apparently in the south. W.C. Bennett, in his little pamphlet *Americanisms* published in 1880, says of South Carolina, that “a Yankee governess employed some years ago by a family in this county told her pupils not to say *legs*, it was a vulgar to say *legs*, to call them *wires*.”

Sometimes you find sentences in English writing that would probably be edited out of any American printed book. I found such in one of the novels of Angela Thirkell. It was a description of a merry-go-around, which had an efigy of a rooster on it and this was the statement that appeared in her novel:

Mr. Grant offered his cock to Lydia who immediately flung a leg over it, explaining that she had a put on a frock with pleats on purpose as she always felt sick if she rode sideways.

That would not appear in an American novel.

The American ambassador to Brussels, who was passing through England in 1934, mentioned this: "you may not in English society use the word *stomach*, it isn't done, you must say *tummy*." Mary Ellen Chase noted the same thing in 1936 in her travel book, *This England*:

One does not utter carelessly and simply, as one does at home, the word *stomach* in England. It is, and in fact all words pertaining to the digestive functions are, ruled out by English manners. Once in ignorance, I used the forbidden word openly at tea party whereat the atmosphere fell to such a degree that on the following day an explanation and apology were tendered to my hostess by the embarrassed friend whom I was visiting.

One of the most outstanding examples of projected taboo from England is *bum*, which has very little taboo in America. We can say, "*I've had a bum day*," a sort of thing that may be on a low level of English but not taboo. But the English association is with *bottom* and is much more under a taboo. This reaction is shown in the report of the premier of New Zealand who came to this country in 1909. He had not been Premier yet but he later was elected to that position and he reported what he had heard in America. He was more English than the English in this regard:

There is one other word of three letters, whose initial letters is as close as it could be to the beginning of the alphabet without actually being the first [That's as close as he can come to it.] which to my disgust is much used in America. Amongst English people it is considered a most vulgar noun, used to describe a portion of the human anatomy, more useful than elegant and never in polite society inferentially referred to as I am now doing. In American it is quite a popular adjective much employed by comic actors and evidently greatly appreciated by the public as it is frequently used in the press. To me, it was most offensive to hear this word used in the presence of ladies and children.

There are various other comments on this term. Alfred Lyle in 1930 mentioned this same one. Certain words considered outside the pale in England may be freely used on this side of the Atlantic. When American soldiers went to England during the last war, they received a little pamphlet to stick in their pockets. It was called *A Short Guide to Great Britain* and it mentioned this very thing. "To say 'I look like a bum' is offensive in their ears, for to the British this means that you look like your own backside. It isn't important, just a tip if you are trying to shine in polite society. This has led to the coinage of a word like

bumfreezer, for a short jacket, what we know as the Eisenhower jacket. And *bumpf* for red tape, which is one of the slang names for toilet paper.”

The English *fanny* refers to the female sexual organ and not the buttocks, as it does here. It has been hard for me to find quotations for this, because in all printed sources you find difficulty in getting material of this sort. But in 1934, for instance, Norman Hare, an English psychiatrist, mentioned that in English the penis is often referred to familiarly as *John Thomas* and the vulva as *Fanny*, or *Pussy*. When in an American novel we find “he gave her a slap on the Fanny” the English think that that’s a very strange thing to happen.

Perhaps the most outstanding example of geolinguistic differentiation of a word is found in the word *bloody*. For generations Americans have found a mystery in the British use of this word. How early did this slang meaning develop in England? If you look it up in the *OED* you will find that earliest is 1676. But Ernest Weakly in his reading for the *Etymological Dictionary* was successful in finding one as early as 1606. He was reading a play by the dramatist John Marston and in *The Fawn* he came across this speech, attributed to a nymphdoro, a young courtier: “These mischiefs of society, intelligences or informers will cast rumor into the teeth of *lillious baldus*, a man cruelly eloquent and bloodily learned.” Their “bloodily learned” in the adverbial form seems to be at least a forerunner of the slang meaning that has been current in England so long.

You may be interested in the earliest comment by an American that takes note of the word *bloody*. The earliest I’ve been able to find is from the year 1828, in the writing of John Neal. He had been spending several years in England and wrote about American literature for some English magazines. He came back to this country and founded a weekly of his own in Portland, Maine, called the *Yankee*. He took up some linguistic differences between British and American English and this was his treatment of the area.

The English women are not very fastidious neither, they do not call a child a *babe*, nor eating *taking be*, nor would they imagine that it was more delicate that a neighbor had a *son* or *daughter* than that he had a boy or girl. And if they do not talk as freely about *purges* and *physics*, as a Frenchwoman, or with so many ridiculous roundabouts of speech as a woman of our country, it is certainly true that they are in the habit of calling too many things by their Christian names. That they do talk at times in a language that would be thought very coarse here. Nothing is more common for example than to hear a well-bred English woman talk about being *knocked up*, or *gagged to death*, or *done up like a coach horse*.

Phrases that are never heard in this country out of the mouth of a decent woman, yet here in America the very poetry and novels of everyday speech and the favorite literature of the age abounds in others that would be thought unpardonable overseas, *bloody* for example.

This writing by John Neal caused some contributors to send him letters and they pretended to be shocked. I can't help thinking that in much of the discussion of taboo there is a pretense of being shocked whereas people are really glad for the chance to air their views on the subject.

We might ask how this taboo on *bloody* is inculcated in England. The answer is the one that I gave a few minutes ago that it results from conditioning in early youth. I came across a novel published in 1937, which shows this very well. This is perhaps a fictional incident but I think it has great verisimilitude. This is from Ruth Adams' *War on Saturday Week*.

She leaned down to help them up. Mary raised her hand and Cedric made his knee bleed. After that first howl which etiquette demanded, he became extremely proud of the scratch and squeezed it carefully to make more blood come.

"Look, I'm all bloody all over my knee."

"Ssh, you mustn't say that word; it's a bad word," said Nora reprovingly.

"Which?"

"That one about *blood*. Nurse says it's a bad word that it is written on the lavatory wall at school."

Mary and Cedric were impressed. It seemed entirely appropriate that a bad word should be written on a lavatory wall. Lavatories and swear words both belonged to that mysterious brotherhood that must only be spoken of in a whisper, and then not by their own name.

So now, Mary looked accusingly at Cedric and his bloodstained knee, and Cedric was conscience stricken.

It is that matter of being "conscience stricken," you see, that is at the heart of the taboo problem. Also, as a result of this, many false origins have been manufactured to support the taboo. English children are constantly told that it is derived from "by our Lady," so that religion should prevent you from using *bloody*, but there is utterly no truth in that. It is one of the manufactured stories. They are also told that you must not say it because of the social class, that low class people use it. But that is also not true; it is found throughout all social

classes and upper class Englishmen are well known to use it in their moments just with each other.

The epochal change in this word's history occurred in 1911 when George Bernard Shaw persuaded Mrs. Patrick Campbell to speak the word *bloody* in *Pygmalion*. It did cause a national storm but the word survived. I was much interested in what would be done when that was turned into *My Fair Lady* and when I went to that show I pricked up my ears very closely where *bloody* should have occurred. It simply would not operate for an American audience when we don't have that taboo. What would they put in its place? I have here my original little note that I wrote in the dark when I heard the speaker give it: "Move your bloomin' arse." I think that's not a very bad substitute. It uses the *bloomin'* from British speech and *arse*, the intrusion of the "r" that is so characteristic of English speech in contrast to American and yet it fulfills the need at that particular spot in the plot.

Americans have given much testimony to the currency of *bloody* in England. One of the best is in the reminiscences of J.F. Doby, the Texas folklorist, in his book *A Texan in England*. He recorded the conversation of a pub that he loved to go to and this is what he wrote: "One day the genial authority on Esthonia, jellied eel and migration gave us a mild toast ... here's to your blood and here's to your health, if your blood's not good, your health can't be good.... So here's to your bloody health." What a circuitous way to bring the word in, you see, but then Doby goes on:

The word *bloody* never fails to strike conversation from an Englishman. Of course it no longer carries the odium that made a Victorian mother ban it as one of the two unutterable expressions for her daughter she didn't know any others herself.

There's also the report of a Lady Weems, the wife of the tenth Earl of Weems. She was said to be a lady of commanding aspect and alarming demeanor, with a deep resonant voice, and she was attempting to teach the young boys in her presence to say *thank you*. She quite unintentionally terrified a small boy at the school feast:

"Will you have any more cake, little boy?" she asked in her deepest of tones.

"No."

"No what, little boy?"

"No more cake."

"And what else, little boy?"

“No more *bloody* cake.”

It is true that *bloody* is losing its potency in England and if you talk on this subject with an Englishman he is likely to tell you that nowadays they think nothing of the word. But still you find reports to the contrary. When June Havoc was making a telecast, the British censor attended the dress rehearsal, made notes, and then announced the score. Three *damns*, two *hells* and one *bloody* would have to be eliminated, because of the rule in British TV that you can have only one *damn* in every half hour, one *hell* in every half hour, and one *bloody* in every ninety minutes.

The question might arise as to whether we Americans are ever likely to adopt the word *bloody*. It seems, at this late date, as if that will not happen. There was ample opportunity when the American soldiers were in close contact with the English in the last war, but it was not picked up. But I think we can say that British English is perhaps the richer for having it as a rhetorical device and American English is lacking a word that has this formality about it of carrying this particular message.

Is there a solution for the problem of verbal taboo? Will we always have obscenity with us? It surprised me that I found a very strong defense of the use of obscenity in a writer none other than Katherine Anne Porter, who is very sensitive to such things and yet, in the magazine *Encounter* for February 1960, this was the reasoning that she indulged in:

Yet the language needs these words, they have a definite use and value and they should not be used carelessly or imprecisely. My contention is that obscenity is real ... is necessary as expression, a safety valve against the almost intolerable pressures and strains of relationship between men and women. Not only between men and women but between any human beings in this unmanageable world. If we distort, warp and abuse this language, which is the seamy side of the noble language of religion and love, indeed the necessary defensive expression of insult towards the sexual partner and contempt and even hatred of the insoluble stubborn mystery of sex itself, which causes us such fleeting joy and such cureless suffering, what have we left for a way of expressing the luxury of obscenity which for an enormous majority of men, by their own testimony is half the pleasure of the sexual act. We cannot and should not hallow these words, because they are not hallowed and were never meant to be. The attempt to make pure tender sensitive washed-in-the-blood-of-the-lamb words out of the words whose whole intention, function and place in our language is meant to be exactly the opposite is sentimentality and of a very low order. Our language is rich and full and I dare say there is a word to express every shade of meaning and feeling a human being is capable of, if

we are not too lazy to look for it, or if we do not substitute one word for another, such as calling a nasty word, meant to be nasty, we need it that way, pure, or a pure word nasty. This is an unpardonable tampering with definitions.

Miss Katherine Anne Porter does not convince me. I think that she is defending unhealthy attitudes. I set down my reply in a bit of writing of a few years ago in the preface to the Edward Sagarin's book *The Anatomy of Dirty Words* and I think I want to give you my reply to Katherine Anne Porter. I refuse to accept the situation that she postulates. Anyone who believes in unnecessary defensive expression of insult towards the sexual partner needs to have his sex attitudes revised and reformed. It is not a simple matter to make such re-orientations and so explosive is the sex power that it may take many generations. But an enlightened individual cannot acquiesce in this aspect of our culture. If Miss Porter lived amongst headhunters, she ought to be against head hunting. She shows, I think, that she has been victimized by our cultural attitude. Does half the pleasure of the sexual act really lie in the luxury of obscenity? She attributes this attitude to an enormous majority of men

Incidents still keep happening that enforce the taboo. I have taken this clipping from the *New York Post*, for instance, from Old Lyme, Connecticut:

Is the word *jackass* a dirty word? Socially prominent Mrs. Cameron Osborn of this charming New England town has withdrawn her son Billy from his second grade class because his teacher washed out his mouth with soap after he had used the word. Mrs. Osborn insisted indignantly today that *jackass* is not a dirty word and she said she would keep Billy out of school until his teacher apologized to her, and so on in this report.

Now there certainly is a case where taboo is being reinforced. I have memories from my own childhood that my mother washed out my sister's mouth with soap for using a bad word. I think it was for my own sake that she washed out my sister's mouth and I remember it clearly and oddly enough my sister doesn't even remember the incident.

Other words turn up. Here is a clipping from the Cleveland, Ohio *Plain Dealer*:

A woman recreation supervisor was given a four-day suspension after using the word "whore" in talking to an 11-year-old girl. Mrs. Sandra J. Tredenny said in her defense that it is a strong word, a good word and one she used while preaching in a Methodist Church. Gerald Turner, the woman's lawyer, said the word was used in a counseling situation at a city recreation center. He said the girl had asked Mrs. Tredenny twice for an opinion of a hair style. She

reportedly replied that the style made her look like a whore. And the suspension then occurred as a result of that.

There is no easy solution to this problem, for if you simply start using these words you arouse the shocked reaction in the situation where you are and the attempt to use the words then, I think, requires a special name: it is *inverted taboo*. If you expect to shock people you are not *contraverting* the taboo, you are following it, but in an *inverted* way. Our problem then would be to get ourselves into the situation where inverted taboo is not the result. I think I find a glimmering of this that occurred in the year 1941 in the letter of an English father to this son who had been sent to this country to escape the bombing. The father was trying to keep in touch with the son and heard that the son had used some bad language. But his reaction seems to me very wholesome and this is what he said to his son, who was out in Arizona. "I gather from Mrs. Pratt that you came back with more than specimens of the local fauna, with a supply of bad language. No doubt you will be discreet and not use these offensive words in polite society but I hope you will not forget them"

It is probable that this shock reaction is dwindling in the general public, year by year and I think we can probably agree with Margaret Mead's analysis in a speech she made only a few weeks ago, and it was reported in a local newspaper.

Anthropologist Margaret Mead says that the current binge of written and spoken four-letter words will also pass providing everyone doesn't become uptight about it. It's this uptightness in the current phraseology that is at the heart of the problem. We are in a temporary period when it is exciting to light up something that was dark, saying words that were forbidden, exhibiting all sorts of things that weren't allowed before, but this excitement is going to wear out.

It is going to wear out if we do not over-react to it, and feel that it is too terribly important. I think she has hit at the heart of the problem there.

This is asking a great deal of us to continue our serene way without the shock reaction. Geolinguistics can help, I believe, by its emphasis on learning the cold facts about language usage scattered over the earth. The dissemination of such facts will free our culture so that the problem itself will be washed away.

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