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978-0-521-52564-0 - Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language

Keith Allan and Kate Burridge

Excerpt

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1 Taboos and their origins

This is a book about taboo and the way in which people censor the language that they speak and write. Taboo is a proscription of behaviour that affects everyday life. Taboos that we consider in the course of the book include

- bodies and their effluvia (sweat, snot, faeces, menstrual fluid, etc.);
- the organs and acts of sex, micturition and defecation;
- diseases, death and killing (including hunting and fishing);
- naming, addressing, touching and viewing persons and sacred beings, objects and places;
- food gathering, preparation and consumption.

Taboos arise out of social constraints on the individual's behaviour where it can cause discomfort, harm or injury. People are at metaphysical risk when dealing with sacred persons, objects and places; they are at physical risk from powerful earthly persons, dangerous creatures and disease. A person's soul or bodily effluvia may put him/her at metaphysical, moral or physical risk, and may contaminate others; a social act may breach constraints on polite behaviour. Infractions of taboos can lead to illness or death, as well as to the lesser penalties of corporal punishment, incarceration, social ostracism or mere disapproval. Even an unintended contravention of taboo risks condemnation and censure; generally, people can and do avoid tabooed behaviour unless they intend to violate a taboo.

People constantly censor the language they use (we differentiate this from the institutionalized imposition of censorship). We examine politeness and impoliteness as they interact with orthophemism (straight talking), euphemism (sweet talking) and dysphemism (speaking offensively). We discuss the motivations for and definitions of jargon, slang, insult, and polite and impolite uses of language when naming, addressing and speaking about others, about our bodies and their functions, nourishment, sexual activities, death and killing. Political correctness and linguistic prescription are described as aspects of tabooing behaviour. We show that society's perception of a 'dirty' word's tainted **denotatum** (what the word is normally used to refer to) contaminates the word itself; and we discuss how the saliency of obscenity

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and dysphemism makes the description *strong language* particularly appropriate. This is not a triumph of the offensive over the inoffensive, of dysphemism over euphemism, of impoliteness over politeness; in fact the tabooed, the offensive, the dysphemistic and the impolite only seem more powerful forces because each of them identifies the marked behaviour. By default we are polite, euphemistic, orthophemistic and inoffensive; and we censor our language use to eschew tabooed topics in pursuit of well-being for ourselves and for others.

Taboo and the consequent censoring of language motivate language change by promoting the creation of highly inventive and often playful new expressions, or new meanings for old expressions, causing existing vocabulary to be abandoned. There are basically two ways in which new expressions arise: by a changed form for the tabooed expression and by figurative language sparked by perceptions of and conceptions about the denotata (about faeces, menstrual blood, genitals, death and so on). We have shown elsewhere (e.g. Allan and Burridge 1991, Allan 2001) that the meanings and forms of some words can be traced back to several different sources; the paths from these sources converge and mutually strengthen one another as people seek a figure that is apt. In these ways taboos and the attendant censoring trigger word addition, word loss, sound change and semantic shift. They play havoc with the standard methods of historical linguistics by undermining the supposed arbitrary link between the meaning and form of words.

This book offers an interesting perspective on the human psyche, as we watch human beings react to the world around them by imposing taboos on behaviour, causing them to censor their language in order to talk about and around those taboos. Language is used as a shield against malign fate and the disapprobation of fellow human beings; it is used as a weapon against enemies and as a release valve when we are angry, frustrated or hurt. Throughout the book we are struck by the amazing poetic inventiveness of ordinary people, whose creations occasionally rival Shakespeare.

This first chapter makes a general survey of taboo before we scrutinize the nature of censorship and distinguish censoring from censorship.

The origins of our word *taboo*

The English word *taboo* derives from the Tongan *tabu*, which came to notice towards the end of the eighteenth century. According to Radcliffe-Brown:

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

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On his first voyage of 1768–71, Captain James Cook was sent to Tahiti to observe the transit of the planet Venus across the Sun. In his logbook he wrote of the Tahitians:

the women never upon any account eat with the men, but always by themselves. What can be the reason of so unusual a custom, 'tis hard to say, especially as they are a people, in every other instance, fond of Society, and much so of their Women. They were often Asked the reason, but they never gave no other Answer, but that they did it because it was right, and Express'd much dislike at the Custom of Men and Women Eating together of the same Victuals. We have often used all the intreatys we were Masters of to invite the Women to partake of our Victuals at our Tables, but there never was an instance of one of them doing it in publick, but they would Often goe 5 or 6 together into the Servants apartments, and there eat heartily of whatever they could find, nor were they in the least disturbed if any of us came in while they were dining; and it hath sometimes hapned that when a woman was alone in our company she would eat with us, but always took care that her own people should not know what she had donn, so that whatever may be the reasons for this custom, it certainly affects their outward manners more than their Principle. (Cook 1893: 91)

Cook does not name this custom either *taboo* or by the equivalent Tahitian term *raa*. It is in the log of his third voyage, 1776–9, that he first uses the term *tabu* in an entry for 15 June 1777 and then again, five days later:

When dinner came on table not one of my guests would sit down or eat a bit of any thing that was there. Every one was *Tabu*, a word of very comprehensive meaning but in general signifies forbidden.¹

...

In this walk we met with about half a dozen Women in one place at supper, two of the Company were fed by the others, on our asking the reason, they said *Tabu Mattee*. On further enquiry, found that one of them had, two months before, washed the dead corps of a Chief, on which account she was not to handle Victuals for five Months, the other had done the same thing to a nother of inferior rank, and was under the same restriction but not for so long a time. (Cook 1967: 129, 135)

In the entry for 17 July 1777, Cook wrote:

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

In the journal entry for July 1777, the surgeon on the *Resolution*, William Anderson, wrote:

[taboo] is the common expression when any thing is not to be touch'd, unless the transgressor will risque some very severe punishment as appears from the great

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

Tabooed objects may cease to be tabooed:

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

Cook and Anderson use *taboo* (or *tabu*) to describe the behaviour of Polynesians towards things that were not to be done, entered, seen or touched. Such taboos are, in some form, almost universal. For instance, there are food taboos in most societies. These are mostly religion-based: the vegetarianism of Hindus; the proscription of pork in Islam; the constraints on food preparation in Judaism; fasting among Jews at Passover and Muslims during Ramadan; the proscription of meat on Fridays among Roman Catholics – to mention just a few examples. Most human groups proscribe the eating of human flesh unless it is the flesh of a defeated enemy or, in rare cases, such as among the Aztecs, a religious ritual. Today, cannibalism is only excused as a survival mechanism as when, after an air crash in the Andes in 1972, surviving members of the Uruguayan rugby team ate the dead to stay alive. Assuming with Steiner² (among others) that the constraint against Tahitian women eating with men was regarded as a taboo on such behaviour, it appears comparable to the constraint against using your fingers instead of cutlery when dining in a restaurant. It is an example of a taboo on bad manners – one subject to the social sanction of severe disapproval, rather than putting the violator's life in danger, as some taboos do. However, we can look at this taboo in another way, as the function of a kind of caste system, in which women are a lower caste than men; this system is not dissimilar to the caste difference based on race that operated in the south of the United States of America until the later 1960s, where it was acceptable for an African American to prepare food for whites, but not to share it at table with them. This is the same caste system which permitted men to take blacks for mistresses but not marry them; a system found in colonial Africa and under the British Raj in India.

Fatal taboos

A nineteenth-century view, attributable directly to Wundt's³ 'folk psychology', is a belief attributed to so-called 'primitive peoples' that there is a 'demonic' power within a tabooed object comparable with the dangerous power of a Polynesian chief or the Emperor of Japan or Satan himself. The effect on whomsoever comes into inappropriate – if not downright unlawful – contact with a tabooed person or thing is severely detrimental to the perpetrator.⁴ This was the common (but not universal) interpretation of the term *taboo* among anthropologists. Mead, for instance, restricts the term *taboo* 'to describe prohibition against participation in any situation of such inherent danger that the very act of participation will recoil upon the violator of the taboo'.⁵ It is as if the tabooed object were like a radioactive fuel rod, which will have dire effects on anyone who comes into direct contact with it unless they know how to protect themselves. 'Cases are on record in which persons who had unwittingly broken a taboo actually died of terror on discovering their fatal error', writes Frazer.⁶ To violate a taboo can lead to the auto-da-fé of the perpetrator. In old Hawai'i, a commoner who had sex with his sister was put to death. A woman who commits adultery can be stoned to death under Sharia law in parts of northern Nigeria today. Under Governor George W. Bush, a convicted murderer was very likely to be executed in the US state of Texas. According to the Bible, God told Moses, 'You shall not permit a sorceress to live' (Exodus 22: 18); implementing scripture, hundreds of heretics and witches were burned in Europe when Christianity had more political power than it does today. Although most taboo violations do not result in capital punishment, there are plenty of other sanctions on behaviour prohibited under the law – whether this is law as conceived and promulgated in a modern nation state, or traditional lore in eighteenth-century Polynesia, or (under church law) the Spanish Inquisition. That which is illegal is *ipso facto* taboo by the very fact that it is prohibited behaviour. But, as we have already seen, there is more that falls under the heading of taboo.

Uncleanliness taboos

There are taboos in which notions of uncleanliness are the motivating factor. Many communities taboo physical contact with a menstruating woman, believing that it pollutes males in particular; some Orthodox New York Jews will avoid public transport, lest they sit where a menstruating woman has sat. Many places of worship in this world taboo menstruating women because they would defile holy sites. The Balinese used to prefer one-storey buildings so that unclean feet (and worse) would not pass above their heads; they still avoid walking under washing lines where garments that have been in contact

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with unclean parts of the body might pass over their heads. Many communities taboo contact with a corpse, such that no one who has touched the cadaver is permitted to handle food.

Violating taboo and getting away with it

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

Generally speaking, we do have the power to avoid tabooed behaviour. When a breach can be ascribed to 'bad karma', there remains a suspicion that the perpetrator is somehow responsible for having sinned in a former life. Even ascribing a breach to 'bad luck' is barely excusable: why is this person's luck bad? That question has a negative presupposition. The conclusion must be that any violation of taboo, however innocently committed, risks condemnation.⁷

Those who violate a taboo can often purify themselves or be purified by confessing their sin and submitting to a ritual. The *OED* (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1989) quotes from Cook's *Voyage to the Pacific* ii. xi (1785) I. 410: 'When the *taboo* is incurred, by paying obeisance to a great personage, it is thus easily washed off.' Hopley describes a Kikuyu ritual for legitimizing and purifying an incestuous relationship:

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

In the Nguni societies of southern Africa who practise *hlonipha*, under which it is forbidden for a woman to use her father-in-law's name or even to utter words containing the syllables of his name (particularly in his presence), inadvertent violation of the taboo may be mitigated by spitting on the ground.⁸ Christians confess their sins to a priest and are given absolution on behalf of God.⁹

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Exploiting taboo

Taboos are open to beneficial exploitation. A person's body is, unless s/he is a slave, sacrosanct. By tradition, a Maori chief's body is taboo. Once upon a time, the chief might claim land by saying that the land is his backbone – which makes invading it taboo. Or he could claim possession by saying things like *Those two canoes are my two thighs*.¹⁰ The taboos on a chief could be utilized by their minions: 'they gave the names of important chiefs to their pet animals and thus prevented others from killing them', wrote Steiner.¹¹ Samoans sometimes tabooed their plantation trees by placing certain signs close to them to warn off thieves.¹² One sign indicated that it would induce ulcerous sores; an afflicted thief could pay off the plantation owner who would supply a (supposed) remedy. Most dire was the death taboo, made by pouring oil into a small calabash buried near the tree; a mound of white sand marked the taboo, which was said to be very effective in keeping thieves at bay in old Samoa.

The genital organs of humans are always subject to some sort of taboo; those of women are usually more strongly tabooed than those of men, partly for social and economic reasons, but ultimately because they are the source of new human life. Few women today are aware of the supposed power of the exposed vulva (commonly referred to as 'vagina') to defeat evil. The great Greek-mythical warrior Bellerophon, who tamed Pegasus and the Amazons and slew the dragon-like Chimaera, called on Poseidon to inundate Xanthos; he was defeated by the women of Xanthos raising their skirts, driving back the waves, and frightening Pegasus. Images of a woman exposing her vulva are found above doors and gateways in Europe, Indonesia and South America; in many European countries such figures are also located in medieval castles and, surprisingly, many churches. They include the *Sheela-n-Gig* images (from Irish *Síle na gCioch* or more likely *Síle in-a giob* 'Sheela on her haunches'), such as that in Figure 1.1 from L'église de Ste Radegonde, Poitiers, France. The display of the tabooed body part is a potent means of defeating evil.

One eighteenth-century engraving by Charles Eisen for an edition of the book *Fables* by Jean de la Fontaine depicts the ability of an exposed vagina to dispel evil forces beautifully . . . In this striking image, a young woman stands, confident and unafraid, confronting the devil. Her left hand rests lightly on a wall, while her right raises her skirt high, displaying her sexual centre for Satan to see. And in the face of her naked womanhood, the devil reels back in fear. (Blackledge 2003: 9)

Less serious taboos

Taboo is more than ritual prohibition and avoidance. We have seen that infractions of taboos can be dangerous to the individual and to his/her society; they can lead to illness or death. But there are also milder kinds of taboo, the

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Figure 1.1. A woman exposing her vulva, L'église de Ste Radegonde.

violation of which results in the lesser penalties of corporal punishment, incarceration, social ostracism or mere disapproval. Humans are social beings and every human being is a member of at least a gender, a family, a generation and – normally – also friendship, recreational and occupational groups. An individual's behaviour is subject to sanction within these groups and by the larger community. Some groups, for example the family and sports-team supporters, have unwritten conventions governing behavioural standards; others, for example local or national government, have written regulations or laws. Groups with written regulations also have unwritten conventions governing appropriate behaviour. In all cases, sanctions on behaviour arise from beliefs supposedly held in common by a consensus of members of the community or from an authoritative body within the group. Although Freud¹³ has claimed that 'Taboo prohibitions have no grounds and are of unknown

origin', it seems obvious to us that taboos normally arise out of social constraints on the individual's behaviour. They arise in cases where the individual's acts can cause discomfort, harm or injury to him/herself and to others. The constraint on behaviour is imposed by someone or some physical or metaphysical force that the individual believes has authority or power over them – the law, the gods, the society in which one lives, even proprioceptions (as in the self-imposed proscription, *Chocolates are taboo for me, they give me migraine*).

There can be sound reasons for putting specific parts of our lives out of bounds. Rules against incest seem eminently sensible from an evolutionary point of view. Communities remain healthier if human waste is kept at arm's length. Many food prejudices have a rational origin. Avoidance speech styles help prevent conflict in relationships that are potentially volatile. Of course, once the taboo rituals are in place, the motives (sound or otherwise) usually become obscured. Original meaning gives way to symbolic idiom, although different stories may later suggest themselves. Take the taboo against spilling salt. Indispensable to life, vital to the preservation of food and a delicacy in cooking, salt was once the symbol of purity and incorruptibility. It was also expensive. Spilling such a precious commodity was calamitous; it may even have exposed the perpetrator to evil forces, because the devil is repulsed by salt. In this case, evil is averted quite simply by throwing a pinch of the spilt salt with the right hand over the left shoulder. The reason for 'left' and 'right' here stem from old associations: the left side is weak and bad while the right is strong and good. Those among us who still engage in this sort of irrational behaviour don't stop to think about the original motivations for the ritual. There's just a vague notion that the act of spilling salt somehow brings bad luck – and we don't tempt fate.

To an outsider, many prohibitions are perplexing and seem silly. But they are among the common values that link the people of a community together. What one group values, another scorns. Shared taboos are therefore a sign of social cohesion. Moreover, as part of a wider belief system, they provide the basis people need to function in an otherwise confused and hostile environment. The rites and rituals that accompany taboos give the feeling of control over situations where ordinary mortals have little or none – such as death, illness, bodily functions and even the weather in those communities that still practice rain ceremonies. Mary Douglas' anthropological study of ritual pollution offers insights here.¹⁴ As she saw it, the distinction between cleanliness and filth stems from the basic human need to structure experience and render it understandable. That which is taboo threatens chaos and disorder.

There is no such thing as an absolute taboo

Nothing is taboo for all people, under all circumstances, for all time. There is an endless list of behaviours 'tabooed' yet nonetheless practised at some time

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in (pre)history by people for whom they are presumably not taboo. This raises a philosophical question: if Ed recognizes the existence of a taboo against patricide and then deliberately flouts it by murdering his father, is patricide not a taboo for Ed? Any answer to this is controversial; our position is that at the time the so-called taboo is flouted it does not function as a taboo for the perpetrator. This does not affect the status of patricide as a taboo in the community of which Ed is a member, nor the status of patricide as a taboo for Ed at other times in his life. Our view is that, although a taboo can be accidentally breached without the violator putting aside the taboo, when the violation is deliberate, the taboo is not merely ineffectual but inoperative.

Sometimes one community recognizes a taboo (e.g. late eighteenth-century Tahitian women not eating with men) which another (Captain Cook's men) does not. In seventeenth-century Europe, women from all social classes, among them King Charles I's wife Henrietta Maria, commonly exposed one or both breasts in public as a display of youth and beauty.¹⁵ No European queen would do that today. Australian news services speak and write about the recently deceased and also show pictures, a practice which is taboo in many Australian Aboriginal communities. You may be squeamish about saying *fuck* when on a public stage, but lots of people are not. Today, no public building, let alone place of worship, would be allowed to incorporate a display of the vulva like that pictured above from L'église de Ste Radegonde. You may believe it taboo for an adult to have sex with a minor, but hundreds of thousands of people have not shared that taboo, or else they have put it aside. Incest is tabooed in most communities, but Pharaoh Ramses II (fl. 1279–1213 BCE) married several of his daughters. Voltaire (1694–1778) had an affair with his widowed niece Mme Marie Louise Denis (née Mignot, 1712–90), to whom he wrote passionately in terms such as:

My child, I shall adore you until I'm in my grave . . . I would like to be the only one to have had the happiness of fucking you, and I now wish I had slept with no-one but you, and had never come but with you. I have a hard on as I write to you and I kiss a thousand times your beautiful breasts and beautiful arse.¹⁶

Not your typical 'cher oncle'. It is tabooed in most jurisdictions to marry a sibling, but some of the Pharaohs did it; so did the Hawai'ian royal family, among others. Killing people is taboo in most societies; though from time to time and in various places, human sacrifice has been practised, usually to propitiate gods or natural forces that it is thought would otherwise harm the community. Killing enemies gets rewarded everywhere, and judicial execution of traitors and murderers is common. Some Islamists believe that blowing themselves up along with a few infidels leads to Paradise. The Christian God said to Moses, 'He that smiteth a man, so that he die, shall be surely put to death' (Exodus 21: 12). Yet in the Bible we find human sacrifice approved in