

Taboo and Euphemism in Manipuri and Assamese Societies: A Study

Salam Brojen Singh

North Eastern Regional Language Centre, Guwahati

Abstract

This paper explores the sociolinguistic phenomena of taboo and euphemism within the Manipuri and Assamese societies, focusing on their cultural, linguistic, and psychological dimensions. Taboos are social prohibitions that influence speech and behavior, particularly in matters related to sex, death, bodily functions, and religion. Euphemisms, in turn, serve as linguistic strategies to avoid directly referencing these sensitive topics. Drawing on field data, literature reviews, and native speaker insights, the study compares how each community encodes cultural values and navigates social norms through language. In Manipuri society, the strong influence of traditional Meitei moral codes and religious beliefs contributes to a rich repertoire of euphemisms, especially in familial and ritual contexts. Assamese society, shaped by a confluence of diverse ethnic and religious traditions, also employs a wide range of euphemistic expressions, particularly in public discourse and interpersonal communication. The findings highlight both the shared South/East Asian cultural roots and the unique sociolinguistic strategies developed by each community to maintain politeness, social harmony, and cultural identity. This comparative study contributes to a deeper understanding of the interplay between language, culture, and social constraints in multilingual societies.

Keywords: taboo, cultural and linguistic taboo, euphemism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language can be considered as a means of communication to share and express thoughts, ideas and feelings or emotions. Language and culture of a community are closely related. Although, culture itself reflects in the custom, tradition, superstition or beliefs of a particular community, the importance and impact of culture on its language is deep-rooted. In short, the language behavior is influenced by the social and cultural aspects. This relationship between society and language is studied in sociolinguistics. According to Wardhaugh “sociolinguistics is about examining the relationships between language and society, and the goal is to have a better understanding of the structure of the language and how the languages function in communication (2006, p. 13).” Taboo is an integral part in this field of study. According to Wardhaugh (2000), “taboo is the prohibition or avoidance in any society of behavior believed to be harmful to its members in that it would cause them anxiety, embarrassment, or shame. Consequently, language is concerned, certain things are not to be said for certain objects can be referred to only in certain circumstances.” Understanding the words or terms that should be avoided in a community is very important so that many awkward situations can be prevented from happening. Misusing of words often leads to miscommunication and misconception. On the other hand culture is also influenced by the language, and the frame of mind of that particular community is reflected in the

language. It can be said that language and culture are the two sides of a same coin. By understanding the taboos, a person will be able to get better understanding of the language of the concerned community and follow certain cultural conventions prevalent in that community.

Due to the development of social civilization, man started to think about the words or terms which can be used in certain social situations, as taboo words or terms are necessary to be used but cannot be expressed. These words or terms which are used in place of the tabooed words or terms to lessen its harshness or negativity may be known as euphemistic words. To sum up, taboo words or terms leads to the emergence of euphemism. The term “euphemism” comes from Greek word *eúphēmos*, which means “uttering sounds of good omen,” “fair-sounding,” or “auspicious.” The first part of that root is the prefix *eu-*, meaning “good.” The second part is *phēmos*, a Greek word for “speech” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/euphemism>). In short, euphemism is a way of using more pleasant and polite words to avoid using the prohibited words, i.e., taboo words. These euphemistic words come into existence as a result of people tends to use appropriate and socially acceptable words to replace these taboo words. In short, euphemism is a result of the existence of taboos and it is a strategy to reduce the negative impact associated with the tabooed topics.

The purpose of this research study is to discuss about the taboos and euphemism that exist in Manipuri and Assamese societies. Although, some taboos are no longer taboos anymore, but some are strictly prevalent till now. In this paper, not only a picture about the taboos in these two societies is depicted, but also a comparison about the similar taboos prevalent in these societies. Besides this, the euphemistic words used in place of these taboos will be vividly discussed. In both the above-mentioned societies, many taboo topics are seen, such as body and organs, animals, naming and addressing, religion, birth and death, etc. In this paper, only those commonly seen taboos will be discussed. These taboos, i.e., “linguistic taboos” in Manipuri “*haiheidaba*”, which are the terms or words which are restricted or forbidden in certain social situations, and “cultural taboos” in Manipuri “*touheidaba*”, that are the things which are prohibited to be performed or done in some particular conditions or situations, will be thoroughly discussed. Moreover, how these two communities use euphemism to contain the negative impact that these tabooed words carry, will also be highlighted.

2. Methodology

The research study is done based on both the primary and secondary sources. As for collection of data from the primary sources, at the outset, the research problems were finding out and clearly set the topics to be investigated. It involves the identification of the tabooed topics. Inquiry method was employed to understand the research problems. The data was collected through questionnaires by preparing data sheets; and interviews were recorded using mobile phone. In the data sheets, many questionnaires like, what are the things that you shouldn't do when eating, when talking to people, etc. was included. The data sheets were in table format and the information was entered in these tables. The questionnaires were prepared in the topics related with the research problems. The secondary sources were discussed and analyzed. Review of literature was done. The collected data was critically studied and analyzed and discussed with the informants.

3. Discussion and Analysis

3.1. Taboos and euphemisms in Manipuri society

3.1.1. Related to naming and addressing

During early times, using of the names of king was prohibited. It was considered a taboo. Moreover, their names cannot be used as personal names. Before the advent of Hinduism in Manipur, it was considered blasphemous to use the names of deities as personal names. People considered them as sacred and using the deities' names as personal names was strictly prohibited. The kings and its royal descendants were assumed to be the re-incarnation of gods. This may be the reason of people not using their names as personal names among the general people. Addressing and using the king's name in conversations were also strictly restricted. Instead, the terms like, "i-ningthou", "ningthem", "sana ibungo", etc. were used. However, after the advent of Hinduism in Manipur, although the tradition of not using the royal name as personal names among the masses was retained, the tradition of using the names of Hindu gods as personal names came into being. This tradition may be result of the belief that, by frequently pronouncing and calling (saying) the god's name, it will shower good fortune, health and happiness to the person. So, the names of Hindu gods, i.e., Krishna, Ramananda, Gopal, Ghanashyam, Shyam were used as personal names. As a result, some native deities' names, like Ayangleima, Panthoibi, etc. were also named among general people.

Referring the name of a deceased person in conversations, specifically in the presence of the deceased's relative is also considered to be impolite and offensive. Instead, some euphemistic word like "lai-oikhraba/lai-oikhrabi" which means "who now become god/goddess" is used. In another way, if the deceased is an elder to the speaker, then it is expressed using polite and pleasant terms, like "leikhydraba ahal-ibungo (male)" or "leikhydrabi ima/indon/abok-ibema" (female); and if he/she is younger, then "leikhydraba ibungo" (male) or "leikhydrabi ibema" (female) are used.

3.1.2. Related to animal names

Uttering the names of dangerous animals, like 'kei' (tiger), 'samu' (elephant), 'lin' (snake) during the night are strictly prohibited. It is believe that if a person utters these names, they may overhear the person and attacked him/her. Instead of these names, people use the euphemistic words, like, 'ibudhou' (grandfather) for 'tiger', 'naapi' (grass) for 'snake', 'awaangba' (tall) for 'elephant'. It is believe that if a person use these euphemisms, he/she will be safe from these animals. In Manipuri society, when a person sets out for work or journey, mentioning the word 'houdong' (cat) is prohibited. It is considered to be a bad sign. Instead the euphemism 'yum-leima' (house-lady/queen) is used

3.1.3. Related to diseases

In Manipuri society, mentioning the names of certain dreaded diseases are prohibited. It was believed that certain diseases like cholera were associated with evil spirits and mere mentioning of these diseases may attract it and cause suffering. That is why uttering and cursing by these words were strictly avoided. Instead of 'cholera' (pukchatpa), euphemism like, 'laina achouba' which denotes the meaning of 'the big/great disease' was used. This may be due to the fact that in earlier times, due to lack of medical knowledge, disease like cholera causes many casualties to the public and it was considered incurable; and they were afraid of it. Although nowadays diseases like, 'cholera', 'small pox', etc. are not taboos anymore; however the disease like 'cancer' is still a tabooed word to some extent. This may be due to the reason that 'cholera' and 'small pox' are no longer considered as incurable diseases.

3.1.4. Related to evil spirits

Telling stories which involve fearful tales of 'helloi' (witch) or 'bhoot' (ghost) at bed time was also

prohibited. This may be due to the belief that the ghost or spirits, locally ‘yenkha pao-tabi’ (eavesdrop witch) might overhear the story and cast a spell on the family members. Sometimes it causes some psychological effect on the children, like nightmares. This may be a reason for this prohibition. It was also restricted to respond as ‘hao’ (yes) when someone calls his/her name specifically at night. It was believed that witches and ghosts roam at night in search of food (human). They will call the person by his/her name. If the person responded as ‘hao’, it was believed that he/she will die soon. So, instead of using the tabooed word, the words, ‘kari haige’ means ‘what (are you saying)’ are used to answer.

3.1.5. Related with sex

In the normal situations, words related to sex, body parts and functions are prohibited to use. They are considered obscene, vulgar and un-cultured words. However, sometimes these words are used directly by people that belong to people in lower status in the society and un-educated persons; whereas educated and cultured express these words using euphemism. Using of the euphemistic words are considered to be more appropriate and cultured. For instance, the instead of ‘angang pokpa’ (to give birth), the euphemism ‘angang unaba’ (to meet a child) is used. In the same manner, instead of the word ‘mapuk-kangba’ (pregnant), the euphemism ‘meeronba’ or ‘naopuba’ (pregnant) is used.

Besides the above, there are many such taboo words related with excretion, body fluids, etc. It is considered less-cultured to say certain things like urine passing, passing stools, etc. directly. They are expressed indirectly using more pleasant terms. For example ‘mapan-thokpa’ (going outside) is used to denote urine passing ‘yung hanba’. Likewise ‘khong haamba’ (washing legs) or ‘manung changba’ (going inside) is used to express defecation ‘thi phaiba’. During menstruation, a woman is not allowed to cook in the kitchen. Instead of directly mentioning the words, ‘mangba’ (menstruation), the euphemistic words ‘chakkhum-thokpa’ (going out of kitchen) is used to express the tabooed word.

3.1.6. Related to use of certain words at night

Mentioning the words, i.e., ‘yaingang’ (turmeric), ‘yetum’ (needle) and ‘sunu’ (lime) during night are strictly forbidden. Instead of these taboos, the euphemisms, i.e., ‘machu’ (color), ‘phigi maiba’ (cloth’s physician) and ‘angouba’ (white) respectively are used to express the desired meaning. In earlier times, the word ‘yaingang’ (turmeric) was used as euphemistic word to denote ‘sana’ (gold) specifically during night. This may be due to the similarity in color of these two things. As thieves are active during night and there were frequent incidents of eavesdropping, on a safer note people used this euphemism to thwart attention of the thieves. In the course of time, this euphemistic word became known to the thieves. ‘So, people avoid using the word ‘yaingang’ (turmeric) in the night time, as using the word may cast a misconception to the hearer that the person is talking about ‘sana’ (gold). The word ‘yetum’ (needle) is also forbidden to mention during night. The probable reason might be that, the needle is very small in size and if misplaced during the night, it may prick and injure anyone. Thus, as far as possible people try not to use needle during night, as light was scanty in those days. If need to mention this word, they used the euphemism ‘phigi maiba’ (cloth’s physician). In the night, use of the word ‘sunu’ (lime) is not allowed. Instead the euphemistic word ‘angouba’ (white) is used. Although, exact reason for using this euphemism is not known, probable reason may be to restrict or reducing chewing of betel nut with betel leaves during night.

3.2. Taboos and euphemisms in Assamese society

3.2.1. Related to naming and addressing

In the Assamese society, in a formal situation, if a person addresses someone by his/her personal name,

it is considered impolite. Instead, the terms like ‘dada’, ‘bhaiti’ (younger brother), etc. are used. However, friends and closely known ones address one another by personal name; whereas kin prefer to use nicknames instead. In the past too, using of name of kings was considered a taboo. Even the word, ‘raja’ (king) was prohibited to be used as personal names among the masses. This may be due to maintain and protect the superiority and social status of the kings.

In this society, it is prohibited to mention a child’s weight as ‘bhaari’ (weighty). Instead of this, a euphemism ‘gudhur’ (weighty) is used. There is also another word ‘ujon’ which is used to denote this. However, the word is expressed with an adverb, e.g., ‘kam ujon’ (less weight) or ‘besi ujon’ (more weight). Without the adverbs, it will not convey the desired interpretation. The same is seen in Manipuri society also. If a child is healthy and weighty, they use the euphemistic word ‘hakpa’ instead of ‘lumba’, where both carry the same meaning of ‘weighty’. This is because of that people believe that if somebody uses this tabooed word on the child, it may bring illness to the child.

3.2.1. Related to animal names

Mentioning the names of dangerous animals like ‘bagh’ (tiger) and ‘saap’ (snake) are forbidden, particularly at night. In place of these words, the euphemisms ‘banaraja’ (king of forest) and ‘dighal’ (the long one) are respectively used. If somebody happens to be bitten by a snake, it is advised to say that he is bitten by ‘dighal’. Perhaps, people think that it may help in psychologically pacifying the person. Also, the word ‘eirawat’ (elephant) is not allowed to be mentioned, specifically when the animal is within the speaker’s sight; instead, the euphemistic word ‘maharaj’ (king) is used.

3.2.2. Related to diseases

Mentioning directly the words which are connected with sex and its function, and dreaded disease are considered less-polite and obscene. This may be due to the impression that the native words sound a little vulgar and obscene in some particular social situations. So, instead of using the words like ‘prahab’ (child birth), ‘pet-hua’ (pregnant) and ‘gusua’ (abortion), the English words ‘child birth’, ‘pregnant’ and ‘abortion’ are used as euphemisms. The practice is mostly prevalent among the people that belong to higher strata of the society. However, among the lower strata people and less educated people, they use to express directly using these words. In the same convention, the dreaded diseases, e.g., ‘modhumei’ (diabetes) and ‘horu-aa’ (small pox) are also not mention directly. Instead, they use the English words in place of the native words.

3.2.3. Related to unnatural deaths

Uttering the unnatural deaths, like ‘atma hatya’ (suicide by hanging), the term ‘apon-ghati’ is used. The premature deaths namely, ‘gusua’ (abortion) and ‘garbhapat’ ‘miscarriage’ were also tabooed. These deeds were believed to be associated with evil spirits and uttering these words is considered to be inauspicious. It was believe that mentioning these words may bring misfortune or bad luck to the user, and uttering these words was almost considered as doing the act. So these socially not sanctioned words were strictly avoided.

3.2.4. Related to use of certain words at night

In Assamese society, certain words are forbidden to be used at night time. If somebody asks for ‘chuna’ (lime) at night, the person will use the euphemism ‘boga’ (white). It is considered a taboo using the original word ‘chuna’ for lime. Also, if somebody wants ‘haldi’ ‘turmeric’ at night, the person will use a euphemistic word, ‘rang-gura’ (color) instead of the original word. Although the above mentioned taboo and euphemism is less practice in urban area or among the higher class of the society, the practice is still very much prevalent in villages or among the people belongs to lower strata of the society. The reason

may be because of the cosmopolitan nature of inhabitation in the urban or city areas.

Referring the name of a dead person, specifically in front of the deceased's family members or relatives is considered impolite in this community. Instead of using the names of the deceased person, they used the euphemism, i.e., 'swargiya' which means 'the person who left for heaven', along with the appropriate kin term (if the deceased person is older than the speaker) and the name of the deceased person (only when it is necessary to mention, otherwise it is avoided). The word 'swargiya' is used for both male and female, but the term 'swargiyaa' is used only for deceased females. If the deceased person is male and is older than the speaker, then the speaker will use the words 'swargiya danggoria' and 'swargiyaa danggoriyani' for male and female respectively to refer them; and the honorific term 'swardhaar' (with respect) is affixed, e.g., 'swardhaar danggoria' and 'swardhaar danggoriani'. By using the euphemism in place of the names of the deceased persons, the speaker is showing respect to both the deceased and his/her relatives.

3.2.5. Related to religious ceremony

In a religious ceremony like marriage ceremony, if a bridegroom or bridegroom's convoy has to cross a bridge or river when he goes to attend his marriage ceremony at the bride's place or residence, it is considered inauspicious; and it is believed that this will create problems in the relation of the bride and groom in their married life. If the situation (crossing a bridge or river) is unavoidable, then he should offer a 'dakshina' (offering in the form of coins and flowers) to the bridge or river before crossing it. This cultural taboo exists in Manipuri society too. This may be because of the reason that both the communities follow the same religion, i.e., Hinduism. Sometimes religion has great impact on the linguistic and cultural taboo of a community.

4. Taboos in the present context

In the present society, due to significant changes in habitation and steady development in respect of science and education, certain taboos are no longer prohibited and forbidden. As an instance, the king's name which was forbidden to be used as personal name by the people is being used by the commoners nowadays. This is prevalent in both the societies. The changes or decline may be due to the factors like, end of king's rule, education and outside contact, changes in habitation, etc. In urban or city areas, the habitation is mainly of cosmopolitan type. It results mixing up of language and culture and it makes difficulty in retaining the taboos associated with a particular culture. Due to education, people have become rational. The taboo practices associated with the dreaded diseases are no longer taboos, as the diseases are no more dreaded as considered to be in earlier days. The same is in the case of taboos related to animals. However, some of the taboos, especially the ones that are related to body parts, sex, and religion are still very much in practice.

5. Conclusion

From the above discussion and analysis, it is seen that Manipuri and Assamese communities have a variety of taboos and euphemisms. It may also be concluded that in both the Manipuri and Assamese societies, there are a number of similar taboos, specifically the cultural taboos which both the communities practiced. This may be due to the fact that these two communities share the same religion, Hinduism. Some of the cultural taboos related to religion or religious ceremony, e.g., offering 'dakshina' when the bridegroom has to cross the bridge or river, for attending his marriage ceremony at the bride's place is practiced in both the communities. In Manipuri society many taboos related to religion came to

existence after the advent of Hindu religion. This impact is clearly seen in a number of Manipuri compound words like 'prasadi-khunba' (picking up prasadi), which is used as euphemism instead of 'chak chaba' (eating rice). It may be expected that the present study will be able to illuminate the practice of taboos and euphemisms in Manipuri and Assamese speech communities.

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