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ASSESSING THE OFFENSIVENESS LEVEL OF TABOO WORDS IN PERSIAN

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Abstract

Taboo words have always been embarrassing and even frightening to utter among almost all human beings. This issue takes on a very particular shape in a religion-stricken society like Iran with its own particular way of conceptualization of morality. This study examines the effect of "gender" and "formality of situations" on the use of euphemisms in Persian. Adopting Allan & Burridge(2006)'s pragmatic approach towards euphemisms, we aimed to find out 1. How social and contextual variables affect the use of euphemisms 2.then, determine the x-phemistic value of taboo-denoting words and expressins. This was carried out through distributing an opinion survey among 30 Iranian men and women ranging 20 to 30 years old, in which they were asked to determine the x-phemistic value(euphemistic-orthophemistic-dysphemistic) of 15 words and expressions denoting the concept 'prostitute' ranging from highly euphemistic to complete taboo, based on the provided circumstances in the questionnaire.

Key Words: Euphemism, Dysphemism, Orthophemism, Taboo Word, Offensiveness.

1. Introduction

Each speaker in a speech community is well-aware of how proper a linguistic form is in a particular situation. Assessing the offensiveness level of words entails the difficult task of identifying participants, role relationships, social norms and individuals' intentions. Discussing offensive language automatically raises the topic of taboo words and euphemisms. So, we consider taboo topics(and their linguistic realizations) as the primary means of affronting the interlocutors' face and euphemisms as preventive linguistic devices which contribute to maintaining face wants.(Allan &Burridge, 2006; Allan, 2007).

Out of various social and contextual elements which determine the appropriateness of an expression in a particular context, in this paper, we are focusing on "gender" and "formality of situation" and will examine their crucial role in identifying Persian words and expressions as taboo or euphemism. First, we take a glance at these two variables before elaborating on the approach through which we analyze our data.

1.1. Gender and Language Use

Men and women show different linguistic behaviors. Many scholars have dealt with gender specific languages. (Trudgill,1983; Jay,1992; Jay &Jonschewitz,2008; Wardhaugh,1986). Normally, women tend to use linguistic forms which are closer to the polite language variety and are more hesitant to use taboo words in public. So, they are mostly censoring out taboo-related concepts and applying instead euphemistic expressions to avoid possible threats to their own and the hearer's face. Taboo domains dramatically affect the speech of both sexes; men usually have more freedom in using taboo language, contrarily, women have always been

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expected and trained to talk 'lady like'. Of course, the minimum use of taboo words by women doesn't necessarily mean that they are not familiar with the linguistic manifestations of taboo areas, but this fact represents their incredible capability in observing social norms and polite behavior." Women's rare use of offensive language in comparison with men has caused men to avoid uttering taboo words in the presence of women. "Utilizing taboo words occurs more among same-sex gatherings and men are more probable to resort to taboo talks in public"(Coats, 1993; Jay & Jonschewitz, 2008).

1.2. Formality of situation

One of the elements in social context giving rise to various linguistic styles is formality of situation. It's in fact situations in which an individual is positioned. "Linguistic forms associating with formality of a situation are called 'style' and can be assumed as a continuum with scales ranging from formal to informal"(Trudgill, 1983; Wardhaugh, 1986). Any single variation in factors like setting, role relationships, topic and aim of the conversation, communication channel and so on would result in a corresponding stylistic change. Allan & Burridge (2006) have put this idea forward that "the source of stylistic variations can be found in the connotative meaning of words which give rise to 'cross-varietal synonymy', that is, words with the same denotative meaning but different connotative meanings". (p.47). For example, the words '*goh*', '*pipi*' and '*madfoo*' in Persian despite denoting the same concept 'feces' are used in different contexts and represent distinct styles. Therefore, "connotations attached to the words give rise to x-phemisms (euphemism, orthophemism, dysphemism) which in turn function as 'stylistic indicators' in particular contexts of use" (p.29). Based on what has been said so far, it should be noted that speakers realize the taboo (contamination) level of a word mainly through its connotations and the appropriateness of a word to be uttered in a particular situation is perceived through corresponding the connotations with the formality level of a situation. An expression is deemed offensive and taboo when it doesn't fit in with formality of that particular situation and its application would lead to stylistic discord and hence affronting the interlocutors' face. The level of stylistic discord indicates the amount of offensiveness and the probable outcomes of proscribing a taboo.

2. Methodology

This paper aims to find out how 'gender' and 'formality of situation' as social and contextual variables determine the offensiveness level of Persian words denoting the concept of 'prostitute'. Adopting Allan & Burridge (2006)'s pragmatic approach to euphemisms, we rely on their categorization of x-phemisms (euphemism, orthophemism, dysphemism) to determine how x-phemistic value of words in Persian are designated through particular situational contexts. To distinguish among these three terms, let's see what they mean by x-phemisms. According to Allan & Burridge: "Euphemisms and orthophemisms are words or phrases used as an alternative to a dispreferred expression. An orthophemism is typically more formal and more direct (or literal) than the corresponding euphemism. A euphemism is typically more colloquial and figurative (or indirect) than the corresponding orthophemism". (2006: 32-33). "A dysphemism is a word or phrase with connotations that are offensive either about the denotatum and/or to people addressed or overhearing the utterance". (2006: 31; 1991: 26). Therefore, since both euphemisms and orthophemisms are substitutes to tabooed expressions, they avoid the loss of face by the interlocutors. Of course it should be pointed out that "orthophemisms are neither necessarily euphemistic nor insulting and dysphemistic". (2006: 32)

2.1. Questionnaire and participants

For the aims of the research to be implemented, that is, determining the x-phemistic value of Persian expressions in particular situations, we resorted to questionnaire and by means of a survey we obtained Persian speakers' attitudes towards a taboo topic in two distinct situations. The questionnaires were distributed among 30 Iranian undergraduate students (15 men and 15

women) ranging from 20 to 30 years old. The participants were given a brief oral instruction on how to deal with the questionnaire in an appropriate way.

Now we turn to the structure of the questionnaire. It is comprised of 2 pages. On the top of the first page participants' age and gender was requested, then right below it an assumed formal situation was presented. Participants should in their mind picture a situation in which they're in class discussing the topic of 'prostitutes' in the presence of their teacher and classmates (of both sexes). Beneath the situation there's a table comprising of 15 words and expressions denoting the concept of 'prostitute'. These items have been listed from highly euphemistic to absolute taboo and in front of the words there are 3 options, that is, 'polite', 'neither polite nor necessarily impolite' and 'offensive'. Participants were asked to what extent these expressions sounded polite (or offensive) to them in this situation and they were expected to respond by choosing one of the three options provided for each term. On the second page, again an assumed situation was presented; this time a quite informal one where they should imagine themselves in a café discussing the topic of 'prostitutes' with a very close friend (of their own sex) and based on the provided situation they were asked to what extent the following words sounded polite (or offensive) to them by choosing among options. (To see the questionnaire, refer to appendix 1).

2.2. Expressions listed in the questionnaire

As it was already mentioned, the expressions contained in the questionnaire were rated from highly euphemistic to complete taboo. The first three items are circumlocutions :

1. *Zanaanikemoteahed bekhanevadenistand* which literally means 'women who aren't faithful to their families'.

2. *Zanaani k bekhateremrarema'aashdast be harkarimizanand*, 'women who do everything to make a living.

3. *Zanaani k darmanjalabvafesadforooraftehand*, 'women who have sunk into corruption'.

Items listed from 4 to 9 are mainly jargons and rather scholarly words for talking about the concept 'prostitute'. Item no.4 is *roospi* 'white faced' which is a popular term in sociology and journals. Item no.5 is *zan e khiabani* 'a street woman' which is again a rather formal word. Item no.6 is *isharze* 'valueless', item no.7 is *zan e kharaab* 'a corrupted woman'. Item no.8 is *khodforoush* 'self-selling'. Item no.9 is *harjaaie* 'a woman going everywhere' with the stress on the first noun in order not to be confused with 'everywhere' with the primary stress on the second noun 'jaaie'. Items listed from 10 to 15 are quite offensive to be uttered in a formal setting and incorporate a high degree of taboo. Item no.10 is *daaf* 'girlfriend' or 'a wandering girl' which is a popular Persian slang. Item no.11 is *faahesheha* feminine noun meaning 'doer of a big sin'. Item no.12 is *bad kaareh* 'wrong doer'. Item no.13 is *lekateh* which is an out date term for addressing prostitutes found in old stories not contemporarily used. Item no.14 is *jendeh* which is the nastiest term used to refer to a prostitute among Persian speakers. This word has not been written in Persian in the questionnaire since it carries highly negative connotations and for the sake of moral considerations, we replaced it by its phonetic transcription as a euphemistic device. Item no.15 is *khanomraeis* 'a female boss', a slang which is used to refer to professional prostitutes.

3. Data analysis

3.1. Data analysis method

Data collected were analyzed by means of statistics methods compatible with the research aims. In order to identify the offensiveness rating of words in different situations and also based on gender distinctions, we made use of a t-student test; moreover, the test results were represented in tables to present a concrete portrait of what has been carried out.

3.2. T-student test based on formality of situation

3.2.1. T-student test for words in formal situation

To exactly determine the x-phemistic value of words in different situations based on their offensiveness ratings, we made use of a t-student test. In each test there is a part called Zero Hypothesis; it's a preliminary claim whose acceptance or decline will be known after the test is done. In this section, our zero hypothesis is to consider all items(words) orthophemistic and inoffensive. If the hypothesis is approved it would mean that a given word has been orthophemistic. But if the hypothesis is declined we can conclude that that word is either euphemistic or dysphemistic and differentiating among these two will depend on the amount of the average, that is, an average over 2 for dysphemistic terms and less than 2 for euphemistic expressions. On the other hand in the output of the test we are given an amount called Sig (amount of significance) based on which we decide to accept or reject the zero hypothesis. If Sig amount be more than 0/05, we confidently accept the hypothesis and if this amount be less than 0/05, we reject the hypothesis confidently. Table 1 shows t test results for words and expressions in formal situation:

Table 1: T-student test result for words in formal situation

Significance amount (sig)	degree of freedom (df)	Average	Word's name	
.000	29	1.1667	زناني که متعهد به خانواده نیستند	1
.000	29	1.3333	زناني که بخاطر امرار معاش دست به هر کاری میزنند	2
.002	29	1.5333	زناني که در منجلاب و فساد فرو رفته اند	3
.662	29	2.0667	روسی	4
.448	29	1.9000	زن خیابانی	5
.000	29	2.6333	هرزه	6
.000	29	2.6667	زن خراب	7
.001	29	2.5000	خود فروش	8
.000	29	2.8333	هرجایی	9
.000	29	2.8667	داف	10
.000	29	2.8000	فاحشه	11
.000	29	2.6667	بدکاره	12
.000	29	2.8333	لکاته	13
.000	29	2.6333	خانم رئیس	15

As can be observed in table 1, only the sig amount belonging to words number 4 and 5 are more than 0/05 and Zero hypothesis is accepted for them. It means that these two words are considered orthophemistic. For expressions 1, 2, 3 the Sig amount is less than 0/05 and therefore the hypothesis is rejected for them. It means they are considered dysphemistic terms. Obviously, the most offensive word 'jendeh'(14) is not seen in the test output; that's because all

participants have considered it offensive in formal situation. Based on the test results we can divide words into word groups in formal situation as can be seen in table 2 below.

Table 2: Word grouping for words in formal situation

Items	Number attached to each item	Name of word groups
زناني که متعهد به خانواده نيستند	1	Inoffensive word group
زناني که بخاطر امرار معاش دست به هر کاري مي زنند	2	
زناني که در منجلا ب و فساد فرو رفته اند	3	
روسپي	4	Neutral word group
زن خياباني	5	
هرزه	6	Offensive word group
زن خراب	7	
خود فروش	8	
هرجايي	9	
داف	10	
فاحشه	11	
بدکاره	12	
لکاته	13	
/jende/	14	
خانم رييس	15	

3.2.2.T-student test for words in informal situation

Table 3: T-student test result for words in informal situation

Significance amount (sig)	degree of freedom (df)	Average	Item	
.000	29	1.0333	زناني که متعهد به خانواده نيستند	1
.000	29	1.0333	زناني که بخاطر امرار معاش دست به هر کاري مي زنند	2
.000	29	1.2333	زناني که در منجلا ب و فساد فرو رفته اند	3
.003	29	1.5333	روسپي	4
.000	29	1.4000	زن خياباني	5
.023	29	1.6667	هرزه	6
.003	29	1.6000	زن خراب	7
.023	29	1.6667	خود فروش	8
.070	29	1.7667	هرجايي	9
.184	29	1.8000	داف	10
.354	29	1.8667	فاحشه	11
.058	29	1.7333	بدکاره	12
.522	29	1.9000	لکاته	13

.305	29	2.1667	/jende/	14
.030	29	1.7333	خاتم رییس	15

As the test results indicate in table 3, the Sig amount for words 9 to 14 is more than 0/05. So, Zero hypothesis is accepted. It means the level of offensiveness for these words in informal situation is about neutral (orthophemistic). For expressions 1 to 8 and also number 15, the Sig amount is less than 0/05 and also the average for these words is less than 2; hence, they're considered inoffensive. None of the words have an average beyond 2,so we conclude that none of the words are offensive in informal situation.It means in informal situation we are left with only 2 word groups of *inoffensive(euphemistic)* and *neutral(orthophemistic)*. Table 4 shows word groups in informal context:

Table 4: Word grouping for words in informal situation

Items	Number attached to each item	Name of word groups
زناني که متعهد به خانواده نیستند	1	Inoffensive word group
زناني که بخاطر امرار معاش دست به هر کاری میزنند	2	
زناني که در منجلاب و فساد فرو رفته اند	3	
روسپی	4	
زن خیابانی	5	
هرزه	6	
زن خراب	7	
خود فروش	8	
خاتم رییس	15	Neutral word group
هرجایی	9	
داف	10	
فاحشه	11	
بدکاره	12	
لکاته	13	
/jende/	14	

3.3. T-student test based on gender distinctions

3.3.1. Formal situation

In the previous section, in each situation (formal versus informal) we categorized words and through which we determined their offensiveness level, but now we intend to compare the word groups in different situations among both sexes. In order to compare men and women's attitudes in each situation, once more words are tested by means of t-student test. This time the Zero hypothesis is the equality or sameness of each one of word groups among men and women, put it another way, the equality of word groups' average among men and women. Accepting the hypothesis would mean that men and women have the same attitude towards words' level of offensiveness and rejecting the hypothesis would mean that two sexes have different attitudes towards words' level of offensiveness. In other words, either men or women have considered them as offensive which is in turn distinguishable through average amounts; higher average for a sex would mean that words have been considered more offensive for that gender. Table 5 shows the comparison of word groups' offensiveness rating between men and women in formal situation:

Table 5: T-student test result for comparing the offensiveness level of word groups in formal situation

Test result	Significance amount (sig)	Degree of freedom (df)	average		Words related to each word group	Word group
			men	women		
Zero hypothesis is accepted	0/403	28	20/27	1/42	3,2,1	inoffensive
Zero hypothesis is rejected	0/000	28	00/5	2/40	5,4	neutral
Zero hypothesis is accepted	0/119	19/5	00/67	2/84	15,14,13,12,11,10,9,8,7,6	offensive

As is seen in table 5, the Sig amount only in neutral (orthophemistic) word group is less than 0/05. So, the Zero hypothesis is rejected. It means the offensiveness level of the orthophemistic word group is not the same for men and women, furthermore, given the higher average amount among women we conclude that the offensiveness level of the orthophemistic word group is more among women. In other two word groups, the hypothesis is accepted. It means that men and women have the same attitude towards the offensiveness level of the word groups.

3.3.2. Informal situation

This last t-student test is going to show us how different men and women's attitudes are towards word groups in informal situation as indicated in table 6.

Table 6: Test results on comparing the offensiveness level of word groups among men and women in informal situation

Test result	Significance amount (sig)	Degree of freedom (df)	average		Words related to each word group	Word group
			men	women		
Zero hypothesis is rejected	0/02	28	1/2	1/67	15,8,7,6,5,4,3,2,1	inoffensive
Zero hypothesis is rejected	0/000	28	1/42	2/32	14,13,12,11,10,9	neutral

Table 6 indicates that in both word groups, the Sig amount is less than 0/05. Therefore, Zero hypothesis is rejected. In other words, the offensiveness level of these two groups is different for men and women. Moreover, regarding the higher amount of average for women in comparison to men, we can conclude that the offensiveness level of these word groups for women in informal situation is more than men.

4. Conclusion

4.1. Results in terms of the formality of situation

1. For both men and women, the offensiveness level of words in formal situation is more than informal one.

2. In formal situation, both men and women find absolute taboo words thoroughly unspeakable.

3. In formal situation, both men and women consider circumlocutions as a helpful means of talking about taboo topics.

4. In informal situation, for both men and women, no word is considered taboo and dysphemistic.

5. In formal situation, men and women believe that slangs are considered taboo and offensive.

6. In formal situation, jargons are for both men and women orthophemistic.

7. In informal situation, taboo words are considered orthophemistic by men and women.

4.2. Results in terms of gender distinction.

1. In formal situation, women rather than men consider the words more dysphemistic and offensive.

2. In formal situation, women rather than men find orthophemistic word group more offensive.

3. In formal situation, the offensiveness level of euphemistic and dysphemistic word groups are trivial among men and women.

4. In informal situation, women rather than men, consider the words more offensive.

5. In informal situation, women deem orthophemistic words far more offensive.

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Appendix 1

پرسشنامه
سن: جنس: زن
مرد
موقعیت رسمی
در کلاس و در حضور استاد و همکلاسیهای خود (پسر و دختر) که تنها
دارید به منظور آسیب شناسی پدیده «زنان خیابانی» با آنها گفتگو میکنید
الفاظ زیر در چنین موقعیتی تا چه اندازه توهین آمیز به نظر میرسد؟ (چه الفصاحی
میدانید؟) پاسخ خود را با انتخاب یکی از سه گزینه زیر مشخص کنید:

Age:

Gender: Male Female

Formal Situation

In class and in the presence of your teacher and classmates, with whom you have a casual acquaintance, are talking about 'prostitutes'. In your opinion, how insulting the use of the following expressions might be in such a situation? (or what words do you think are more polite). Choose one of the three options in front of each item.

توهين آميز (offensive)	نه مودبانه و نه الزاماً توهين آميز (neither polite nor necessarily impolite)	مودبانه (polite)	
			1- زناني که متعهد به خانواده نيستند.
			2- زناني که به خاطر امرار معاش دست به هر کاري مي‌زنند.
			3- زناني که در منجلاب و فساد فرورفته اند.
			4- روسپي
			5- زن خياباني
			6- هرزه
			7- زن خراب
			8- خودفروش
			9- هرجايي
			10- داف
			11- فاحشه
			12- بدکاره
			13- لکاته
			14- /jende/
			15- خانم رئيس

موقعيت غيررسمي

در يك کافي شاپ با يکي از دوستان بسيار صميمي خود (دوست همجنس) در مورد «زنان خياباني» گفتگو مي‌کنيد. به نظر شما در چنين موقعيتي، کاربرد الفاظ زير تا چه اندازه توهين آميز به نظر مي‌رسد؟ (چه الفاظي را مؤدبانه‌تر مي‌دانيد؟) پاسخ خود را با انتخاب يکي از سه گزينه زير مشخص کنيد:

Informal Situation

In a coffee shop, you are talking about 'prostitutes' with a very close friend. In your opinion, how insulting the use of the following words and expressions might be in such a situation?

توهين آميز	نه مودبانه و نه الزاماً توهين آميز	مودبانه	
			1- زناني که متعهد به خانواده نيستند.
			2- زناني که به خاطر امرار معاش دست به هر کاري مي‌زنند.
			3- زناني که در منجلاب و فساد فرورفته اند.
			4- روسپي
			5- زن خياباني
			6- هرزه
			7- زن خراب
			8- خودفروش
			9- هرجايي
			10- داف
			11- فاحشه
			12- بدکاره
			13- لکاته
			14- /jende/
			15- خانم رئيس