

SHIFTS IN TABOO LOADING

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Swearwords, like their more respectable kin, are subject to linguistic change. The change does not, however, have to be strictly semantic. On a lesser scale there is evidence of shifts in what has been termed the 'taboo loading' of these words.

2.0 TABOO LOADING

'Taboo loading' is a term used by Brian Taylor in his description of Australian swearwords (1976). This is a way of describing the concept that, within the limited class of swearwords, some words are considered 'worse' than others. Taylor provides a ranking of seven levels of taboo loading with a ranking of '6' being the most taboo/offensive and '0' being the least so.

(1)

	taboo load	noun ±animate
swearwords	6	cunt
	5	bastard
	4	bugger
quasi-swearwords	3	bludger
	2	swine rat stinker
	1	dog cow pig coot 'B' devil
	0	beast beggar

(excerpt from Table B, p. 57)

Table one provides an excerpt from Taylor's original table. Taylor divides the terms into 'swearwords' and 'quasi-swearwords' with a column for words with the same referent/topic. He proposes that individuals may vary as to the relative ranking of terms and the division between swearwords and quasi-swearwords. Usage also varies. One speaker, for example, may never use terms ranked higher than three whereas another speaker may find those terms completely ineffective for vehemence and rely on higher ranking terms.

3.0 SHIFTS IN TABOO LOADING

The purpose of this paper is to examine shifts in taboo loading over time. I propose that the loading of any specific word is not fixed diachronically. The taboo loading can shift with time, the word becoming either more or less offensive. These shifts can occur in a relatively short period of time. Another way of viewing this would be to say that general levels of offendedness¹ have shifted with time.

This seems to make sense intuitively. Most people would probably agree that such changes have occurred during their own lifetimes. Anecdotal evidence for this is easy to find. Even within the literature it appears to be a standard assumption that the reactions of earlier generations do not match our own. Jay (1992), discussing a study conducted by McGinnies in 1949 where subjects were asked to write words which were flashed very briefly on a screen, comments "imagine having to say a word like 'bitch' or 'kotex' in a psychology experiment in 1949!" (p. 171).

As a preliminary study of this shifting I looked at a sample of academic papers dealing with swearwords. The dates of the papers ranged from the turn of the twentieth century to current publications. What I wanted to know was what words were viewed as swearwords and what were the attitudes, explicit or implicit, expressed towards them at varying times throughout the century. I worked with the assumption that academics would try to reflect (unconsciously, perhaps) the usage and opinions of the time.

3.1 Pre-WW II

The first paper (chronologically speaking) is "The Psychology of Profanity" by Prof. G. T. W. Patrick (1901). Patrick includes in his paper a typology of swearwords. He lists seven categories:

- (2)
1. Names of deities, angels and devils
 2. Names connected with the sacred matters of religion
 3. Names of saints, holy persons or biblical characters
 4. Names of sacred places
 5. Words relating to the future life (heaven, hell)
 6. Vulgar words
 7. Expletives

(pp. 114-115)

As can be seen, his categories are primarily religious. The category of 'expletive' he defines as "words or phrases having unusual force ... Many of these will be found to be fossil remains of religious terms or of ejaculatory prayers" (p. 115). His examples include terms such as 'mercy', 'gracious', 'confound it' and 'hang it'. Religious swearwords are the main focus of his paper. He sprinkles them liberally throughout the paper, including amusing anecdotes and such, with no apparent compunction about writing them out in full. The notable exception is his sixth category of vulgar words. These get only the vaguest reference. They are defined as "words or phrases unusual or forbidden by polite usage" (loc. cit.)--which seems to imply the other six categories are not unusual or forbidden. This is the only category without examples and in the subsequent discussion the unknown words get only three carefully worded sentences to explain their use (p. 126). It can only be assumed that the words in question are those that are often called the "four-letter words", viz. 'fuck', 'shit', 'bitch' and similar terms.

Macy wrote in 1923 about editorial "mutilation" of swearwords. He coins the term "disenvoweling" (p. 594) to describe the frequent substitution of a dash for the vowel in a word deemed offensive. Macy argues for full publication and practices what he preaches but his only examples are religious; presumably the only examples he could find. He cites 'hell', damn 'God', 'Jesus Christ', 'zounds' and 'Ecod' (which he states is "now rare" (p. 596)) but there is no reference to anything similar to Patrick's "vulgar" words.

There do occur cases of reference with no representation. Graves (1927) prints religious swearwords freely. He also has no objection to publishing the word 'bastard' which he defines as lower class (p. 17) but he refuses to put the word 'bugger' in print. He discusses the word and goes to elaborate lengths to let the reader know which word he is talking about--"the other common word in 'b.', which originally meant a Bulgarian heretic, but later implied 'one addicted to unnatural vice'" (p. 18)--but the word is never mentioned directly.

A similar process is found in work by Allen Read (1934) who published an entire paper on the word 'fuck' in which the word itself is never once mentioned. The following year (1935) Read published a short monograph on graffiti which he had collected in the late 1920's and early 1930's. The profanity included in this collection is almost exclusively non-religious swearwords fully printed in glorious black-and-white. Graffiti has changed little in the past sixty-five years. Reactions to it, though, have. Read warns the reader that "(j)udged merely as reading matter...(the book)...is abominably, incredibly obscene." (pp. 5-6). My own reaction, as a 28 year old in 1995, was not one of shock, disgust or titillation but of curiosity and amusement. In the bibliographic section Read talks about the difficulty he had getting it published (pp. 28-29). It finally had to be printed privately in Paris and was limited to 75 copies. It didn't get a wider circulation until it was re-issued by Maledicta Press in 1977! This work is invaluable in a study such as this because it establishes the usage of 'vulgar' terms at that time. Most words are familiar; included are the full gamut of sexual and scatological terms. It provides evidence of common usage of what are generally termed the 'four-letter words' which get little or no mention in other discussions of the period. The difficulty of publication and the careful defense of the work in its opening chapters indicate that these words were highly charged (at least when printed in a book) and probably had a very high taboo loading.

3.2 The 1940s and 1950s

While wars have been blamed for the 'relaxation' of attitudes towards swearing, change during and after the second world war seems to have been slow. Menken (1944) discusses the four high occurrence religious swearwords ('hell', 'damn', 'God', 'Jesus Christ' and their various combinations) but does not include any reference to the 'four-letter words'. We do see, however, the start of recognition of taboo-loading in another category of words--the slur. Menken discusses terms which were acquiring status as invectives: 'Bolshevik', 'communist', 'fascist', 'isolationist', 'anti-Semite', 'Nazi' and 'New Dealer'.

Taylor's paper (1976) also falls into this time period. Although the paper was written and published in the 'seventies', he acted as his own informant and places himself firmly in this period. Even allowing for the mellowing passage of time, his attitude towards the terms he discusses is worth mention. He deals with the words in a straightforward and direct manner but he is acutely aware of the offensive nature of the words. He compromises by writing the words out phonetically. He includes both religious and nonreligious terms but non-religious terms predominate, something of a change and a hint of things to come.

3.3 From the 1960s On

Here the shift is fairly noticeable. Words such as 'fuck' and 'shit' (the four-letter words) are seen in almost any study on taboo language from the 'sixties' on. Religious terms are generally limited to 'hell', 'damn', 'God', and 'Jesus Christ'. All words are usually written out in full although there are still occasional exceptions. Selnow (1985) presents a study using "sixteen items on a list of profane words" (p. 307) but we never find out what these items are. However avoidance of printing swearwords in full has become the exception.

It is interesting to compare Prof. Patrick's (1901) taxonomy with that of A. Ross Eckler (1987). Eckler divides the subject matter of taboo words into four categories:

(3)

1. sexual functions (obscenities)
 2. defecation and urination (scatologies)
 3. physical or mental characteristics of other groups (slurs)
 4. deities (blasphemies)
- (p. 203)

Patrick's five religious categories have been conglomerated into one while his 'vulgar terms' have been subdivided. Ecklers's third category, slurs, appears marking its more recent addition to the field. Timothy Jay includes discussion of these slurs quite extensively in his book *Cursing in America* (1992) and Pamela Munro, in the introduction to *Slang U* (1989) says:

(4)

We have tried to be especially careful to mark words that may be offensive to members of minority groups: interestingly, these words, and words considered sexist seem to arouse far more emotional response among UCLA students surveyed, and the members of our class, than do the traditional four-letter words on the list.

(p. 12).

These slurs and similar comments on the 'difference' of an individual, would seem to be the new 'truly taboo' words. An interesting realization of this could be seen in the media's (particularly television's) grappling with Mark Fuhrman's use of the word 'nigger' during the O.J. Simpson trial. My own sporadic observations seemed to show that the 'serious' news shows played the tape excerpts unedited but the more 'popularist' tabloid shows 'bleeped' all occurrences. Perhaps "the N-word" (as it was frequently called) is acceptable as news but unacceptable as entertainment. Its status is certainly in question.

4.0 DISCUSSION

The sample of papers used herein should not be considered exhaustive, merely representative. These papers offer support to the view that swearwords have had changing taboo loadings in the past century. Often the same words appear but the attitudes towards them have changed with time. The words discussed freely in the first half of the century have died, if not out, then at least down. The words scrupulously avoided by those earlier scholars are now the grist of contemporary study along with a new (and somewhat avoided) type of 'high offense' term--the slur. This may seem an obvious observation when taken in isolation but it is something which ought to be borne in mind when studying taboo language. Shifts in taboo loading have occurred quite rapidly; well within the span of a lifetime. The language of the younger generation often seems to shock their elders. This is easily understood if general levels of offendedness have shifted with time. Perhaps the desire to shock is what causes the shifts. Such shifts may affect the perception of varying age groups and ought to be taken into account in studies with samples which cross generational boundaries.

If, in fact, this is the case, it raises a problem with the present study. It has been virtually impossible to control for the ages of the authors of the various articles. Taylor (1976) seems instinctively aware of this generational variable and, as previously mentioned, places himself in the time period of his own linguistic development. This is not possible with the other authors. It can only be assumed that the papers reflect the usage, at the date of publication, of the young adult to middle-age age bracket.

The shifts seen in the course of this paper indicate that, in terms of what I may call 'popular' swearing²--words or expressions generally regarded as taboo yet with reasonably high frequency--religious blasphemy seems to be dying out. It is being replaced by scatological and sexual obscenity. This is not to say that sexual terms have lost their clout or that religious terms will not offend. It is just that the mass cultural concept (if such a thing exists) of what a 'swearword' is, has changed with the decades. The psychological reasoning behind this is really beyond the scope of this paper but it is difficult to resist hazarding a guess. It may be that popular swearing reflects a shared taboo base which all of a society's members agree should not be mentioned in 'polite society' but

about which everyone is aware. With an increase in global communication and a freer interaction of cultures, the role of religion seems to have declined significantly. It is no longer a certainty that a group of people within our own culture share even a broad set of religious beliefs. On the other hand, the 'sexual revolution' opened the way for greater acceptance of sexual matters. It is now considered acceptable to discuss one's sexual problems in public, preferably on a daytime television talk show. Sex has lost much of its privacy and also much of its taboo. This seems to be reflected in the swearwords commonly heard today. People maintain the old facade of "we don't talk about sex" although everyone actually knows this to be a fallacy, a kind of grand joke that everyone is in on.³

On the other side of the coin, there is the shift in "offensive swearing" as well. The words which once caused extreme offense and discomfort ('fuck', 'shit', 'bitch', etc.) have lost some of their bite but have been replaced by terms which draw attention to people's differences ('nigger', perhaps 'fag' and I would also include terms like 'cunt' which, while still sexual, also emphasize gender). This may be a kind of extension of, or reaction to, political correctness.

5.0 CONCLUSION

An examination of papers of various dates, all purporting to deal with swearing, were examined with the aim of finding systematic changes over time. It was supposed that the papers would reflect the 'popular swearing' of the time of publication and could be used to support the hypothesis that the taboo loading of swearwords shifts over time. The papers examined did, in fact, offer evidence to support this view. They suggest that the scope of popular swearing has shifted from religious to sexual and scatological terms. There also seems to be an emerging category of 'slurs' which are seen as increasingly offensive.

"The line between decency and indecency is an ever-shifting one and merits unremitting investigation" (Allen Walker Read (1935) p.5.)

NOTES

- 1 See Jay (1992) for a full discussion of offendedness (that which offends society) vs. offensiveness (that which offends an individual).
- 2 See Graves (1927), p. 48 for a similar usage.
- 3 Tiefer (1995), in her first chapter, offers an interesting discussion on the changing role of marriage/relationships from economic necessity to companionship.

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