Linguistic Analysis of Sexual Taboos and their Politeness Strategies among University Students in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The present paper outlines various politeness strategies used by young adults in Kenyan Universities to replace linguistically tabooed words and phrases related to sex. The main aim of this paper is to guide users on appropriate linguistic strategies to use when confronted with linguistic taboos which are not supposed to be mentioned. The study adopted Brown and Levinson's Politeness theory (1978) to analyze 11 examples. The study revealed that youths in Kenyan universities employ a variety of strategies to avoid linguistic taboos related to sexuality. The findings could be used to improve current intervention measures on youth's risky sexual behaviors.

Introduction

The present paper analyzes aspects of linguistic taboos related to sexuality used by university students in Kenya. It isolates words and phrases tagged taboo within the context of language use of Moi University.

Studies the world over (Adewale, 1994; Chigidi, 2002 & Quanbar, 2011) have observed that linguistic taboos related to sex and sexuality are omitted in conversation and are either systematically replaced with certain polite strategies or in extreme cases not mentioned at all. According to Chinyanganya & Munguti (2013), linguistic taboos are mainly concerned with the censorship of certain words in communication which are deemed injurious- physically and linguistically to an individual or community. Even though taboos vary from one society to another, it has been reported that the strongest taboo words globally are still associated with sex followed by excretion (Trudgill, 1986). A similar study indicated that sex is also the strongest provider of taboo words while sexuality is the provider of most popular swear words today (Njoroge *et al.*, 2016).

Studies have given justification for tabooing words and phrases related to sex and sexuality. According to Ntuli (2002), linguistically tabooed words and phrases if used overtly in conversation can be perceived as bad manners, obscene, immoral or derogatory. They are also likely to invite some form of retribution (Mbaya, 2002). Most studies which focused on African contexts (Adewale, 1994; Chigidi, 2002; & Moto, 2004) confirmed the fact that it is very uncommon in most African communities to make reference to 'vagina' or 'penises' and other related organs and functions without being repulsed.

Language use related to sex and sexuality is strictly directed by certain moral codes which are entrenched in traditions. Studies such as (Mbaya, 2002; Ogunyemi, 2007; Chigidi, 2009) have revealed that Speakers are socialized right from childhood to adhere to a strict linguistic code which compels them to replace sexual taboo words and phrases with polite alternatives.

However, the authors concur that the degree of perceiving sexual words and phrases as acceptable or prohibited is a preserve of the speech community in question because taboo concepts or objects in one society or culture may be completely neutral in other societies and cultures. Again, the criteria used to lay claim on their variability is not clearly explained (Seifried, 2006).

In most African societies, linguistic tabooed words and phrases related to sex and sexuality are supposed to be avoided by all members of society who instead replace them with polite substitutes (Adewale, 1994). The author further adds that a breach of the language cultural code was met with dire consequences such as shame, ridicule, ostracism or even smacking. Therefore, it is possible that the 'checks' and 'balances' instituted by the various communities compelled members of a speech community to strive to acquire necessary strategic and communicative competences. This would help them conform to in-group values and avoid confrontations.

Allan & Burridge (2006) gave a distinction between taboos and linguistically tabooed words and phrases. The authors observed that taboo topics centre on bodies and their effluvia (Sweat, faeces, menstrual fluid, etc.); the organs and acts of sex, micturition and defecation. On the other hand, it was observed that linguistically tabooed words and phrases are words for sex, body parts, death, and marriage, certain words used in religion like those which refer to God / god and Satan.

Most youth by virtue of their age, level of sexual maturity and urge to show off and be seen as being trendy, use specialized language to express their sexual feelings, desires, actions and objects. Published studies, for example, (Webb & Kembo-Sure, 2000; Gathiora, 2002; Moto, 2004 & Ogechi, 2008) concur that youth have specialized language for sexual matters. They may use coded, borrowed and coined words (Ogechi, 2005) or euphemism (Chinyanganya & Munguti) while communicating to each other.

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The authors are in agreement that other than promoting in-group values such as secrecy, the specialized language enables youth to conform to societal moral and communicative code. Similar studies in Kenya (Ogechi, 2004; Kingei & Kobia, 2007 & Muaka, 2011) have reported that youth in urban settings use *Sheng*.

Ayiro et al (2013) observed that sex is strictly a taboo topic in open conversation in most African societies and can likely predispose youth to sexual risk taking behaviors and HIV/AIDs. Similar studies such as (Ogechi, 2014) have attributed the evolution of *Sheng* (An urban slang) to the youths' need to isolate adults and other would be persons from their sexual exhibits. King'ei & Kobia (2007) attribute the same to the need of urban youth from various parts of the country to get a linguistic code that would accommodate their language needs. However, the above studies did not investigate how the urban slang contributes to taboo avoidance.

Studies have shown that observance of linguistic sexual taboos is not as static as it is dynamic in the African contexts. It is reported that in recent times, most people have developed the tendency to break sexual linguistic taboo rules owing to cultural change, age and educational level (Quanbar, 2011) which result into moral decadence. Further studies noted that other people break linguistic taboo rules in order to express anger, hatred, frustration, antagonisms and other heightened emotions (Mbaya, 2002; Quanbar, 2011; Chinyanganya & Munguti, 2013). This new culture erodes and compromises traditional norms and is likely to generate quarrels, fights, mudslinging and unnecessary confrontations. It is also a clear pointer to the fact that such people either lack strategic and communicative competences which could otherwise enable them manage their language use or are simply reckless language abusers.

From the foregoing little has been established on linguistically tabooed words and phrases related to sexuality. This study therefore sought to answer the following questions: do university students have a specialized language with which to articulate sex and sexual objects considering their diverse cultural and academic backgrounds? If yes, do they use covert or overt language? Finally, what politeness strategies do they use to conform to linguistic taboos imposed on sex and sexual objects?

Methodology

Qualitative research design was adopted for the study. Data collecting instruments in form of questionnaires and Focus Group Discussion Guide were piloted on students from the School of Business and Economics who were not part of the sample population in order to determine their reliability and improve their effectiveness. Purposive sampling was used to select 40 informants from second year students of Moi University (Main campus) in the Schools of Arts and Social Sciences, Biological and Physical Sciences and in the school of Information Science.

A total of 10 informants from each of the schools filled-in questionnaires. A focus group discussion followed a day later to confirm or elicit information that was not well understood. It was the best method used to interrogate aspects of sex related to the study that are tabooed. Data was analyzed thematically based on research objectives and presented in prose.

Theoretical Basis

This study is premised on Brown and Levinson's theory (1978) which presupposes that rational members of society should strive to keep their faces intact and need to reinforce in their view of themselves as polite, considerate, respectful members of society. University students being regarded as custodians of knowledge are expected to exhibit mannerisms that can be deemed polite and respectable, for example, use of cultural appropriate substitute words in place of taboo words and phrases. That way, they guarantee confidence, respect, better understanding and good relationships both for self and others.

Results and Discussion

Linguistic Taboos and their Politeness Strategies

Politeness strategies used by students of Moi University to avoid linguistic taboos are varied and range from simple to complex. They include: spelling taboo words, writing tabooed words, use of morphemic constructions, repeating morphemes, changing syllable order, mixing morphemes in a word, word borrowing, changing sounds in a word, shifting meaning and using complex phrases.

Spelling a Word

This involves spelling a taboo word to an interlocutor. The individual letters of the word construct are spelled out and only a keen listener would make out the meaning. This way, the obscenity embedded in the word is not felt.

Example 1

There are certain words like buttocks, vagina and menstruation that are difficult to pronounce openly. However, spelling them out does not arouse suspicion. For example it is easy to articulate [S-e-x] than mentioning the word 'sex'. This study focused on linguistically tabooed words and phrases related to sexuality.

In example 1, when the sounds of the word 'sex' are articulated, they obscure the bad effect which would have arisen from voicing the word itself. This is a phonological linguistic strategy that behooves the listener to keenly assess the various sounds of a word and connect them to the meaning of the word. The listener's positive image is maintained as he is not subjected to any form of embarrassment.

Writing Text

Writing words and phrases related to private parts, sexually transmitted diseases or sex is a sure way of avoiding embarrassment provided that they are only directed to the intended reader.

Example 2

"Writing words and phrases termed taboo relieve one from the embarrassment of voicing them. When my fiancée was dating me, he wrote me short love messages on phone (SMS) which had some deep sexual undertones. I am sure he would not have the courage to say them."

This finding shows how sex and words related to it are tabooed. Writing the tabooed words and phrases somehow reduces their tabooness as it rids of the shock from the interlocutor. The message in this case is confined to the reader alone to the extent that the level of shock if any may attack him or her alone. However, if the same message would be read by an unintended person, it would produce shock and embarrassment as the social distance between the sender and the third party is wide. This is an indication of how taboos are affected by contexts in which they are used.

Use of Coined Words

Sometimes, new words are coined to replace tabooed words and phrases. Such words and phrases usually have no relationship whatsoever with Kiswahili or any known language.

Example 3

"Sometimes we are forced to use coined words in place of words or phrases referring to sex, private parts and sexually

transmitted diseases. For example 'Ukedi' and 'Ngwengwe' for AIDs and 'halua' for sex.

Coined words have the power to drive away taboo as they are in the first place strange and their meaning is only known to the in-group. Even to a stranger, coined words would require few minutes of serious thought and meaning-searching so that by the time the true meaning of the word is known, the taboo embedded would not be as strong as would have been relayed by the mention of the real terms or words.

Repetition

This linguistic strategy involves repeating a lexical item. Such a lexicon assumes a new meaning in the context of the in-group which uses the word.

Example 4
Leather leather

Example 4 is an English word which is used to refer to refined skin. However, in this context, the term connotes unprotected sex. It is connected to a Kiswahili term 'ngozi kwa ngozi', which literally translated means 'skin to skin'. When said in English, the word does not sound obscene as when said in Kiswahili. However, the term has been in use for a long time and its place has been overtaken by *leather leather*. The fact that the term is coined from an English word may probably show how university students identify themselves with the language of power and scholarship. Given that English is known by few people especially those who are literate may limit the extent of shame or shock to a few people (Particularly the in-group).Out group members would be alienated in any talk involving the word. Overall, this kind of language use is an indication of youth's language creativity.

Changing syllables in a word

This strategy involves changing word formation by interfering with the order of syllables. In most cases, syllables in a word are reversed leading to the formation of a new word that only makes sense to the in-group.

Example 5
Rombo

Example 5 is a derivative of the Kiswahili word 'mboro' meaning 'penis'. However, due to the sensitivity of the word, the syllables in the word are reversed thus changing the form of the word. Thus, [mbo-ro] would become [ro-mbo] in this new linguistic shift. The new word has reduced power because it does not make direct reference to the penis. Given its new form, the word may only make sense to members of the in-group as opposed to those of the out-group. Members of the out-group may therefore be isolated in conversation unless some clarification is made to them regarding the meaning of the new word.

Using Complex Morphemes

Here, two simple morphemes of two different language orientations are joined to form one complex morpheme usually from two languages.

Example 6
Kuingiza box

Example 6 is a derivative of two words from two different languages. 'Kuingiza' is a Kiswahili word while 'box' is an English word. The superficial meaning of the phrase is 'to force something inside a box'. In the context of the language of sex, the phrase may refer to the act of seducing a lady especially with the aim of coercing her into sexual intercourse. So men who succeed in doing that will brag by saying 'Nimemwingiza box' or 'I have managed to conquer her into having sex '. It is worth noting that in the African culture, men are supposed to initiate sexual relationships and display authority over women. They feel good subduing women and prevailing upon their lives like lords.

Indirect Comparisons

This linguistic strategy involves giving a name of another thing a different object or concept.

Example 7
Black forest

Example 7 is a substitute word for vagina. It is the name for a type of sweet cake which has layers separated by barter. The top of the cake is usually decorated with Black cherry which gives it the look of a forest, hence its name. The description of the cake rightfully fits that of a vagina of an African woman which other than being referred to as sweet, it is covered by black pubic hair. *Black forest*, therefore, is used in place of *kuma* (Female genitalia) which may sound obscene if mentioned overtly in Kiswahili.

Modifying a word's pronunciation

Example 8
Baibe

Example 8 is derived from English word, *baby* which is used to refer to a child who is inexperienced and can easily be swayed. However, in the context of the study, the word is used to refer to a male or a female lover. The complexity of the meaning of the word may help to reduce the taboo power of the word as it is not directly linked to lovers. The word is used to show love and as such is pronounced with gusto. Given the word is borrowed from English, it may only be known to members of the in-group and therefore reduces taboo effect.

Meaning Shift

In this strategy, a word is robbed of its meaning and given a new meaning in the context of sexuality. The meaning of the word as used in this context will only make sense to members of the in-group.

Example 9
Gari kubwa

Example 9 is a phrase which literally refers to large vehicles like Lorries, tractors or trailers. However, in the context of the study, the term is used to refer to a female partner who is huge. Normally, the female partners are looked at as vehicles which are 'driven' by men. It is therefore common to hear people telling the other that you are 'driving a big vehicle'. Hugeness is an attribute that is looked upon particularly with reference to women. Use of the term 'big vehcle' reduces the power of the taboo.

Using Euphemistic Expressions

In this strategy, the speaker chooses to use the name of something else to refer to something different although of similar characteristics.

Example 10
Mpango wa kando

Example 10 may superficially mean a plan outside the mainstream plans. However in the context of the study, the phrase is commonly used to refer to a secret lover either a woman or a man. So a married man or woman who has an extramarital relationship may be said to have "mpango wa kando". Usually, such men or women are supposed to be referred by words such as prostitutes or promiscuous which is taboo or may sound embarrassing. The phrase is confined to married people because for a 'Mpango wa kando' to exist, there must be a 'mpango halali' or legitimate plan (Legal wife or husband). Most African men and women would go for relationships outside marriage because they are deprived of sex or are not sexually satisfied or are in an abusive relationship.

Using Ambiguous Phrases

This linguistic strategy involves using phrases whose meanings are not clear or which beg some elaboration to make sense.

Example 11

Amezibeba

Example 11 means he or she has carried them. It is ambiguous as it neither has a subject nor an object. However, it is used in the context of the study to refer to a woman with big attractive buttocks. The indirect reference avoids the taboo that restricts us from mentioning the word buttocks which could arouse shock or embarrassment.

Conclusion

From the above discussion of linguistic taboos and their politeness strategies, it is clear that sex linguistic taboos should be avoided in communication. Secondly, it has emerged that students of Moi University have specialized taboo avoidance strategies for sex and sexual objects. These include spelling tabooed words, writing tabooed words, use of morphemic constructions, repeating morphemes, changing syllable order of words, mixing morphemes in a word, word borrowing, changing sounds in a word, meaning shift and using complex phrases. The paper strongly recommends that studies be undertaken to unearth students' choices of words and phrases related to sex in other universities in order to ascertain whether they vary or remain constant. Further, it recommends that society should embrace student's politeness strategies when engaging them on serious matters like unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, and extra-marital sex, multiple sex partners, HIV & AIDS and contraceptive use which impact directly on their lives. The study may inform research on sexuality, HIV & AIDs, feminism and sociolinguistics.

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