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A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF TABOOS AND EUPHEMISTIC EXPRESSIONS IN A DOGON COMMUNITY IN MALI

By

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Résumé

Cette étude a examiné les mots tabous et les expressions euphémiques utilisés par les locuteurs Bambara au Mali. Elle a également examiné l'effet des variables sociales : âge, sexe et profession sur l'utilisation de ces mots et expressions. Pour atteindre l'objectif de l'étude, des groupes de discussion ont été organisés avec 60 participants hommes et femmes sélectionnés à dessein en fonction de leur âge et de leur profession. Les résultats de l'étude ont permis d'identifier certaines catégories de mots et expressions euphémiques et tabous sociaux tels que la mort, la sexualité et le sexe, qui sont plus utilisés parmi les participants indépendamment de leur âge, de leur sexe ou de leur profession. Les résultats ont souligné que les variables sociales n'affectent l'utilisation de ces expressions que dans certaines situations. Par exemple, les participants âgés de plus de 45 ans ont utilisé plus d'expressions euphémiques que ceux qui ont moins de 45 ans. En outre, les hommes et les femmes n'ont utilisé des expressions différentes que lorsqu'ils ont essayé d'atténuer les effets douloureux de certains tabous liés à la sexualité et au sexe. L'étude du tabou et des expressions euphémiques Dogon permettra assurément de mieux comprendre le phénomène sociolinguistique dans la commune de Madougou au Mali.

Mot clés *Dɔgɔɔ, expressions euphémiques, mort, mots tabous, sexualité.*

Abstract

This study explores taboo words and euphemistic expressions used by the Dogon speakers in Mali. It also investigates the effect of the social variables: age, gender and occupation on the use of these words and expressions. To achieve the objective of this

study, some focus groups were organized with 60 male and female participants purposively selected according to their age and occupation. The results of the study identify certain categories of some social taboo words and euphemistic expressions such as death, sexuality and sex, which are often used among participants irrespective of their age, gender or occupation. The findings revealed that the social variables affect the use of these expressions only in certain situations. For example, the participants over the age of 45 used more euphemistic expressions than those under 45. In addition, males and females use different expressions only when trying to alleviate the painful effects of some sexual taboos. This study of Dogon taboo and euphemistic expressions attempts to shed light on the understanding of the sociolinguistic phenomenon of taboo and euphemistic expressions in the Municipality of Madougou in Mali.

Keywords : *death, Dɔgɔsɔ, euphemistic expressions , sexuality, taboo words.*

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Introduction

The use of taboo words and euphemistic expressions in a language is common in many societies. In some African communities, people avoid using certain words and expressions because of their shocking character, profligacy, and lack of politeness. Taboo words are replaced with euphemistic expressions in order not to hurt members of the community. In this context, death, sex and sexuality, which emerged from the focus group discussion, have been identified as topics. Death is one of the topics the speakers of Dɔgɔsɔ avoid in conversation. Similarly, speakers are also not comfortable talking directly about sex and sexuality. Instead, they prefer to substitute the words and expressions, perceived unpleasant, with pleasurable euphemistic expressions.

Therefore, Dɔgɔsɔ speakers use alternative expressions to replace the unpleasant taboo words or expressions related to death, sex and sexuality. These euphemistic expressions are used to show politeness and reduce the painful effects of taboo words and expressions. In this perspective, Crespo (2005, p.78) states, "Euphemism is a phenomenon intrinsically linked to the conventions of politeness and social tact expected in interpersonal communication". For instance, the Dɔgɔsɔ speakers usually use colloquial figurative language with friends, relatives when announcing death case; this is a way to lessen the painful effects of death such as: [tuwen yalu ne wɔ], (literal meaning: He/she is in the house of truth) or the use of [wo biye lu], (literal meaning: He did not stay) to indicate that someone has passed away (dead). So, death is clearly a social context

in which the taboo expressions are used and the degree of interlocutors' relationship affects the choice of death euphemistic expressions. In support of the forgoing, Farghal (1995, p. 267) says, "The language user's option for a euphemism often emanates from contextual factors such as the social relationship between the speaker and the addressee or the level of formality induced by the setting".

One of the characteristics of human being is to live in social groups and the members of these societies express their feelings, attitude and beliefs through communication and cooperation. Hence, the appropriate use of words by speakers helps them to accomplish successful communication. Many researches and disciplines such as sociolinguistics, psychology and pragmatics, etc. are interested in the topic of euphemism as a communication strategy. Within the same framework, Holmes (2001, p.1) argues that "sociolinguistics is concerned with the relationship between language and the context in which it is used". In other words, Holmes provides some explanations thinking that sociolinguistics studies the relationship between language and society and why people do speak differently in different contexts. The euphemistic expressions are used as a tool that helps people communicate politely and effectively in order to avoid expressions that hurt.

Without the euphemistic expressions, many words of the languages would be considered as rude. Ren and Yu (2013, p. 45) propound that euphemism is a form of language intentionally created in social relations to achieve ideal communication.

Euphemism etymologically originated from Greek. The particles "eu" meaning "good" and "pheme" meaning "speak" can be defined as speaking with good words. Therefore, euphemistic expressions are used to replace taboo words. From this definition, many scholars have defined euphemism in various ways. It is defined as an act of substituting an offensive or unpleasant word for a more pleasant one, thereby veneering the truth by using kind words (Leech,1981; Enright, 1985). Allan and Burridge (1991) propose, "A euphemism is used as an alternative to a dispreferred expression in order to avoid possible loss of face, either one's own or, by giving offense, that of the audience, or of some third party". In other words, these authors define it by focusing on the context in which the speaker and the hearer are located. As a result, euphemism is a face moderator taking into account the mutual cooperation between both speaker and hearer.

Taboo is defined by Wardhaugh (2000, p. 234) as 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. This is to say, taboo is a cultural variable that refers to the expressions or actions that are culturally repudiated. It is virtually a cultural phenomenon; all cultures have specific taboos. It touches every aspect of the individual life (Bello, 2014). There are taboo words related to profession, health, sex, ritual, and so on. Some cultures place more emphasis on some taboos than others. For instance, in the Dogon community and culture, sexual and ritual taboos appear to be the commonest and the strongest.

With respect to parts of the body, for instance, the Dogon communities generally squirrel away expressions that may create curiosity in their children. In this case, parts of the body such as the penis and the vagina are usually called by the Dogons by using terms which they are familiar with and which do not compromise understanding. So, in place of *tεrε* (penis) and *dεmε* (vagina), many adult Dɔgɔsɔ speakers have their children and other people refer to those parts of the body as *aine geru* (manly) and *yana geru* (womanly).

Generally, taboo words and Euphemistic expressions have common ancestors which can be found in most of the world's languages. One of the most significant functions of euphemisms, according to Pavlenko (2006, p. 260), is "to protect speakers from undesired emotional

arousal". Reflecting on the same aspect, Miller (1999) points out by opining that, for the existence of concepts deemed too offensive to speak about in almost all the world's languages, there exists a need for speakers of different languages to find roundabout, indirect and socially acceptable ways of referring to such concepts. According to him, the use of taboo words and euphemism expressions can fulfill important functions of socialization in a speech community. Therefore, the Dogon speakers generally know the usage rules for the taboo words and euphemistic expressions and observe them. In other words, the bidirectional relationship that holds language and culture is also true for taboo words and euphemistic expressions.

1. METHODOLOGY

1.1. Objectives

The aims of this study are to identify the taboo words and euphemistic expressions in Dɔgɔsɔ and to perceive the attitude of the Dɔgɔsɔ speakers. Such a purpose is achieved by answering the following research questions that guided our analysis:

- What are the attitudes of Dɔgɔsɔ speakers towards the use of taboos and euphemism in Dɔgɔsɔ?

- Do Dɔ̀gɔ̀sɔ̀ speakers use taboo words and euphemistic expressions in mixed-sex groups?
- What are the most used euphemistic expressions to replace taboos in Dɔ̀gɔ̀sɔ̀?

2.2. Research Design

The researchers used a mixed method approach. Data were collected using the qualitative technique of Focus Group Discussions, which allowed to elicit reliable responses from the informants and this took two months (February and March 2022).

2.3. Participants

The researchers have purposively selected 10 participants from six villages of the municipality of Madougou, which give a total number of 60 informants. The participants are men and women from 18 to 62 years old; they were sampled according to the age, gender and occupational affiliation.

2.4. Procedure

Two focus group discussions were conducted in each of the six selected villages of the municipality of Madougou. Our research assistants introduced themselves to the participants and explained the purpose of the study. The consent of informants was sought prior to their participation and their

privacy was guaranteed to the extent that information would never be traced to these respondents. Each focus group session started with a brief introduction of the members and the topic of discussion. Later, the researchers summarized the main points for respondents to make comments on or ask questions about. The researchers ensured them that their responses were kept confidentially and used purely for academic research.

2.5. Data Analysis

The audio recordings of the focus groups were transcribed, and we employed constant comparison analysis (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008) for coding and grouping the responses by paying attention to terms, contexts, meanings, and examples used by respondents. Responses in Dɔ̀gɔ̀sɔ̀ are retained in their original forms for authenticity although they were translated to English during data analysis for communication purposes. The data are organized into thematic categories regarding taboo words and their corresponding euphemistic expressions.

3. RESULTS

Before undertaking the taboo and euphemistic expressions, it is necessary to know the age, gender, occupation of the

participants and their attitude to the use of taboo words and euphemistic expressions.

Table 1: Gender and age of the participants

Age	Female	Male	Total
18-25	10	13	23
26-36	7	6	13
37-45	6	7	10
46-62	5	6	11
Total	28	32	60

Source: Field data

Table 2: Occupations of the participants

Occupations	Female	Males	Total
Nurses	3	2	5
Doctors	3	1	4
University students	3	4	7
Shop keepers	8	10	18
Bus driver	0	5	5
Housewives	15	/	15
Administrator	1	5	6
Total	33	27	60

Source: Field data

Table 3: Attitude towards the use of taboo words and euphemistic expressions in Dəgəso.

Motivation	Number of respondents
Yes	39

No	21
TOTAL	60

Source : Field data

The informants were to answer the question whether they liked using the taboo words and euphemistic expressions in Dəgəso. Responses during the focus group discussions showed that there are many categories within which the euphemistic expressions are used to replace taboo words in Dəgəso. In this research, we have identified three categories which are the death taboos, the sexuality, sex taboos, and some social taboos. These taboos and their euphemistic expressions are presented in the tables below.

Table 4: Euphemism for death Taboos in Dəgəso

Taboo	Literal meaning	Euphemism	Literal meaning
wojima	Death	manu / mɔɔju	Disappearance
	He/ she died	ama boi sai jɛ	He answered the call of God
	He/ she died	ama nɛ yai	He/ she went to the almighty

He/she died	ama boi ku wo mo ne dowa	He has been called by the almighty
He/she died	twen yalu ne wo	He/she is in the house of truth
The deceased	ine ju / jurun benu	The one from the hereafter
He/she died	mine suga	He is down the earth
He/she died	ku womo beyaje	He / she has got himself/herself
He/she died	Ku womo gala	He / she has gone
He/she died	wo baruma	He / has is injured
He / She died	Kirun womo gowa	His/ her breath is taken away
He / She died	Wo eli ya	He / she has escaped from this word's great hardship
He / she died (child)	Paruba	His / her breath is gone

He/she died	Olu ne waja	He stayed in the bush
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Source: Field data

The euphemism related to death taboos is the most common and are various. There is death every day and the euphemistic words and expressions are used for the announcement and the burial of the body. This table shows many types of death euphemism in order to avoid the term **jipa** in Dɔgɔsɔ unless they use it unconsciously. At this level, the elderly persons were at ease with the death euphemism more than the young people and women.

Table 5: euphemism relating to sexual activities and sex taboos in Dɔgɔsɔ

Taboo	Literal meaning	Euphemism	Literal meaning
tɛrɛ	Penis	Anrangeru	manly object
dɛmɛ	Vagina	Yanrang eru	Womanly object
aine inɛ	She never had sexual intercourse (She is still virgin)	seyi yolu	She did not wear clothes

tɛrɛ womo gimɛ dɛ	His penis hurts him	dɔpu womo gimɛ dɛ	He feels pain down
Yana kana be	He / she had sex	Yana le yo be	He committed adultery
Igɛ womo nɛ kana mu yabalu	He / she refused to have sex with her husband	igɛ womo lɛ din yabalu	She refused to sleep with her husband
Bɔrɔ / tɛrɛ womo nɛ esi wɔ	He/ she loves vagina/ penis	Yana/ ainɛ womo nɛ esi wɔ	His / her desire for men / women is great

Source: Field data

This second category of taboos and euphemistic expressions is the most used after that of death. It is very difficult for the participants to use these taboo words in other conversational contexts except one who talks with friends. Some participants including the healthcare agents were at ease when giving their opinions about this topic.

Table 6: Euphemism Used For Some Social Taboos

Taboo	Literal meaning	Euphemism	Literal meaning
inɛ num ɔ turu	Handicapped with one arm	Kibelu / lugo dɔlu	Incomplete man / woman
ibani naiti n	Baby is born	Yanran pɔja	The woman is down
Wo bɛrɛi	She is pregnant	Ginrun to	She is at home
Saŋa	She is menstruated	Baŋu wɔ	She is outside (of the family)
Saŋa womo dogo	End of menstruation	Baŋu sumɔ ti	She has washed
Silɛ i	Bastard	Baŋu i	a child born out of dating
tɛrɛ womo yima	His penis is dead	ainɛi la	He is not manly

Source: Field data

This third category is not used all the time as the previous ones. Some of these terms are only used either by women or by

men. They may also be used in social conversation.

4. DISCUSSION

The results are organized into thematic categories regarding taboo words and their substituting euphemistic expressions. These are the death taboos, the sexuality and sex taboos, and some social taboos.

4.1. Results relating to the first research question: What are the attitudes of Dɔgɔsɔ speakers towards the use of euphemistic expressions and taboos in Dɔgɔsɔ

Table 1: Speakers' Attitudes towards Taboo Usage: As the table about Attitudes towards Taboo Usage shows, the majority of Dɔgɔsɔ speakers i.e 39 out of 60 informants declared that they use taboo words, whereas the rest of the participants (21) answered this question negatively.

In addition, most participants, whose responses are positive, are teenagers and adolescents, whereas those, whose answers are negative, are between 45 and 62 years old.

Interestingly, it is noteworthy that age plays a crucial role in pushing people to employ taboo words. Those who are young are not afraid to use the taboo words crudely; in contrast, the elders who got more life

experiences are cautious to use them because they know their meaning.

4.2. Results relating to the second research question: Do Dɔgɔsɔ speakers use taboo words in mixed-sex groups?

The results show that Dɔgɔsɔ speakers use the euphemistic expressions of taboos instead of the taboo words. The research has identified three main categories of taboo within which mixed-sex Dɔgɔsɔ speakers use the euphemistic words and expressions. These three categories are: the death taboos, the sexuality and sex taboos, and some social taboos.

4.3. Results relating to the third research question: What are the most used euphemistic expressions to replace taboos in Dɔgɔsɔ?

One should note that the attitudes of speakers towards the use of taboos differ according to their gender, age and occupation. Some taboo words such as homosexuality, incest, offence to religions are forbidden to utter. This is so because their euphemistic use can hurt people in Malian societies. So the participants have decided to avoid these topics in focus groups. This is an exception; however, many euphemistic expressions are used to express taboos in Dɔgɔsɔ. The first category is in **Table 4: euphemisms for death Taboos in Dɔgɔsɔ.**

The Dəgəso speakers use many other euphemistic words to express **death = yimu**. To express a death in the area: they rather use **mənu or manu** which means passing away or disappearing.

He died (**yima**) considered as taboo: people use a softer substitution (**ama boi sai jε**) meaning =He answered God's calling. Death can also be expressed by:

ama nε yai = He/ she went to the almighty.

ama boi ku wo mə nε dɔwa = He/ she has been called by the almighty

Twen yalu nε wɔ = He/she is in the house of truth.

Kirun womo gowa = His breath is taken away

However, the deceased person is called **jurun benu** meaning the one from the hereafter to avoid the taboo words **yimu**.

Similarly, in the sentence He/she drowned (**dinε yime**), they would say **dinε waja** = He stayed in the water.

Table 5: Euphemism relating to sexual activities and sex taboos in Dəgəso

Below are some example sentences relating to the sex taboos:

The organ, *penis*, is named **tere** but the Dəgəso speakers would rather use **anran geru**= manly object.

She is still virgin, the taboo word is **dimu dimelu or aine inεε**; however, the euphemistic expression used by the Dəgəso speakers to replace the taboo word is **sɔi yolu**= She did not wear clothes.

Another taboo expression is **tere womo gimε dε** means *His penis hurts him*. The polite way of saying it is **anran geru womo gimε dε** meaning *He is feeling pain down*.

He had sex out of marriage **Yana kana be**
He / she had sex is taboo; however, **Yana le yo be** is the euphemistic expression for *He committed adultery*.

Igε womo nε kanamu yabalu = *She refused to have sex with her husband*; the Dəgəso speakers politely say it as **igε womo lε din yabalu** meaning *She refused to sleep with her husband*.

Bɔɔ / tere womo nε esi wɔ= = *S/he loves having sex / S/he loves vagina/ penis* ; people often say **Yana/ aine womo nε esi wɔ** meaning that *His/ her love for sex is great*

Table 6: Euphemism Used For Some Social Taboos

There are some specific euphemistic words to express social taboo in Dəgəso.

The first example of taboo is **numɔ turu** = Handicapped with one arm; the polite way to say it is **lugo dɔlu/ kibelu** meaning *Incomplete man*.

Another example taboo is **ibani naitin** = Baby is born; the suitable expression is **Yanran pɔja** which means literally *Lady has come down*.

A third example of taboo is **Wo bɛrɛi** = Pregnant woman, the euphemism is **Duwɔ le wɔ / Ginrun to** meaning *She is wearing weight / She is at home*.

It is not advised to say **Saŋa** = menstruation, but we can use **Baŋu wɔ** meaning that *She is on her periods. Literally meaning she is outside (the family)*. Similarly, it is also forbidden to say **Saŋa womo doga** = End of menstruation; it is replaced with **Baŋu sumɔ ti** = Wahsing (the dirt).

A *bastard* might be called in Dɔgɔsɔ **Silɛ i** but the euphemistic term used for that is **Baŋu i** meaning *a child born out of wedlock (born at a time when his/her parents are not married)*.

In Dɔgɔsɔ people will not say **tɛrɛ womo yima** which means literally his penis is dead, but they say **ainɛi la /** = He is not manly.

In general, every language constantly changes over time. The forms and meanings evolve, too. The linguistic changes analyzed in this work are in fact premeditated and intentional, which means not unstructured. One thus makes use of euphemisms in order to skirt unpleasant, offensive, and disgraceful words. Also, it should be noted that some of euphemistic expressions are

sentential and not just single lexemes. This implies that the use of taboo words and euphemistic expressions by the Dogon speakers abide by the rule of politeness, linguistic properties, and the adequacy to sociocultural reality. Speakers exploit linguistic input indirectly, often using more words than necessary. Though it is often warned against verbosity, it allows, to some extent, to avoid using crude, rude and offensive words for convenience.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Dɔgɔsɔ speakers, like the Bamanankan and Khassonke speakers in Mali (Koné et.al, 2022; Dianka, et.al, 2022), have positive attitudes towards the use of taboos. However, in reality, they prefer using euphemistic words and expression to replace the taboo words and expressions. It is concluded that the study has identified three main categories of taboos which were replaced with euphemistic expressions. The three domains of taboo words were related to death, sex and some social phenomena. The study revealed that although it is always necessary to identify taboo words, their use may depend on the speakers who perceive them as communication strategies. Many Dɔgɔsɔ speakers will find it interesting to get an insight of what is allowed or what is not allowed to utter in the society.

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