

Interlingual Word Taboos

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A creek Indian person from Oklahoma stated that the Indians avoid the use of certain words of their own language when white people were around. It turned out that they avoided words which have some phonetic similarity to the "four-letter" words of English. These words were avoided even though it is unlikely that a white person who does not know Creek would catch these words and attach any special significance to them.

The question then is how did the taboo develop? The reason might be that it was a direct result of bilingualism among the creeks. The more English they knew and used, the more conscious they would be of the phonetic similarity between certain Creek syllables and the tabooed words of English. Thus the avoidance grew as bilingualism increased among the Creeks and as they came more and more to think in terms of the white man's taboos.

Some of the words that are avoided are the following: *fakki* "soil, earth, clay," *apiswa* "meat, flesh," and *apissi* "fat." Monosyllabic words are very rare in Creek. Therefore the words given here contain more than one syllable, only one of which is similar to an English tabooed word. The similarity may appear to be strengthened by the fact that it is the accented syllable which bears the similarity.

Thai students studying in the United States also avoid the use of certain words of their own language which bear a phonetic similarity to English obscene words. They avoid these words only around English speakers. The reason for the avoidance appears to stem from their own uncertainty about the propriety of using the words because of their knowledge of English. This tradition of avoidance is a continuous one: Thai students already residing in this country teach each succeeding group of newly arrived students about the taboo, and in this way the avoidance is kept alive from year to year. However, since the Thai do not migrate to this country, the taboo exists only among students.

Because of the phonetic nature of Thai, there are more words on the taboo list than there are in Creek. Also, since Thai is monosyllabic, the words resemble the English tabooed words more than the avoided words of Creek do.

The tabooed words of Thai include the following: *fag* "sheath, pod," *fag* "to hatch," *phrig* "(chili) pepper," and *khan* "to crush, squeeze out." Regarding the word *khan*, there are other words that have the same sequence of sounds but are different in tone, e.g. *khan* "to itch" and *khan* "to be funny, to crow, waterbowl" but it is only the word that has a high tone that sounds similar to the English tabooed word for Thai people.

A group of Thai students were faced with a dilemma because of the word *phrig* "(chili) pepper" because it was necessary to use this word when eating out. Therefore, in order to observe their self-imposed taboo and at the same time provide themselves with a substitute term, this group translated the obscene connotation of the word if interpreted as English into the elegant Thai term of the same meaning *lyn* "the lingam." So in one limited circle of intimates (men), the word *lyn* acquired a secondary meaning "pepper" by translation a Thai word as if it were an English word. This example is interesting for two reasons:

- 1- Most types of vulgarity and familiarity of speech are not avoided by the Thai among intimates who are generally of the same sex and age group. Therefore, although *lyn* actually has the meaning they were trying to avoid when using it as a substitute for *phrig*, this particular substitution must have been virtually spontaneous.
- 2- Vulgarity and familiarity of speech should be avoided in the presence of those who are not intimates.

Therefore, since the word *phrig* might be overheard by persons who were not intimate (speakers of English in this case) and since it was liable to interpretation as a tabooed word, the word had to be avoided.

There are other instances of avoidance in Thai. They are interesting because they are less likely to be misinterpreted as obscene words by English speakers than are the words mentioned earlier. For example, the following words also come into the tabooed category: *chid* "to be close," and *cid* "heart." The second word is usually used as component of given

names in Thai. If a man is named *somcid* which means literally “suing the heart”, he would be very embarrassed that he would avoid the use of his Thai name while residing in the United States and adopt an English nickname instead.

These examples range from words whose phonetic resemblance to English tabooed words is very close to others whose resemblance is so slight. This careful avoidance of such words in the presence of speakers of English arises from an acute anxiety about the proprieties of speech. This anxiety is very well reflected in the Thai language itself, because one of its noticeable characteristics is the existence of a very large number of synonymous sets of words which are different only by the varying degree of vulgarity and politeness associated with their use. There are at least eleven words meaning “to eat” which reflect varying degrees of politeness or vulgarity. Therefore, the Thai are willing to go to extreme lengths to avoid the slightest suspicion of vulgarity.

The problem of tabooed words also exists in reverse. This happens when certain harmless English words have phonetic similarity to tabooed words in other languages. An example of this is found in the Nootka Indian language of Vancouver Island. The English word *such* has a close resemblance to Nootka *sac* “vagina.” As a result, teachers find it impossible to persuade their girl students to pronounce the English word under any circumstances.

Another example of this sort is also found in Thai. The English word *yet* is very similar to the Thai word *jed* “to have intercourse.” This word is considered vulgar and impolite in Thai language. However, it is not one which would be avoided among intimates, i.e., persons of the same sex and age group. Nevertheless, the English word *yet* is very often a source of embarrassment to the Thai, particularly girls studying English in school.

The examples talked about in this paper illustrate two different types of situations. In the Creek-English example it is possible that in time the supposedly objectionable words of the minority language may become obsolete or obsolescent. The Thai-English example, on the other hand, is a matter of temporary avoidance and will never have any permanent influence on the Thai language. Thai students may try to avoid certain English-sounding Thai words while residing in this country, but they do not continue to observe the taboo after they return to their country.