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## TABOO AS A LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL PHENOMENON

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### *Abstract*

The article analyzes the peculiarities of the national world perception, particularly the understanding of prohibitions and norms in human behaviour and speech as a reflection of human perception from ancient times to the present period. The article deals with the causes and origins of taboos, the ways of their linguistic expression and their role in communication. The article presents the results of the study of linguo-cultural and linguo-cognitive aspects of the formation of the linguistic world picture exemplified by the material of taboo vocabulary and phraseology. The review of scientific literature on the problem of taboo in the human world perception based on its ontological, sociolinguistic and linguistic and cultural characteristics is carried out. The scientific novelty of the study is because the language continuing to evolve, in the process of its functioning can change its semantic and linguistic and cultural space. The identification of such processes allows us to explore the world picture in the language in its historical aspect. The relevance of the study is due to the need to integrate the data from different humanities for a deeper analysis of the language. The article describes the procedure of analysis of Russian phraseological turns motivated by various taboos. The article presents the long-term experience of the researchers of the linguistic and cultural space, Russian phraseology and comparative analysis of phrase-forming in different languages through the aspect of the formation of the national system of world perception and its reflection in the language world picture.

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**Keywords:** Taboo, linguistic culture, world picture, euphemism, ethnic group.



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## 1. Introduction

During its evolutionary development, the language becomes a storage and expression of many cultural phenomena of different peoples – cultural traditions, prohibitions, norms, mental codes, cultural meanings, etc. The study of the semantic and linguistic and cultural space of the language makes it possible to identify the ways of forming a system of the worldview of the people, the native speaker, in a wide cultural and historical context. The famous triad "world-man-culture" reflects the ways of forming a world picture of the people. The ontological nature of the language can explain many of the phenomena and rules that form its structure and content because the connections of the triad "world of things-thinking-language" are inseparable. Beginning from the world perception and understanding of it by an ancient man and up to the modern state of the language, the development of valuable, ethical and normative concepts, which are perceived by speakers of modern languages as mandatory elements of speech behaviour, continues. Such linguistic and cultural phenomena include taboo, which has been the origin of morality and the code of laws since ancient times. Wund (1970) called taboo as "an ancient unwritten moral code".

Taboo is a system of ancient prohibitions of religious and ceremonial attitudes that characterize a certain stage of social development of peoples. The system of sacred prohibitions from ancient centuries was widespread not only among the peoples of Polynesia, but also in India, North America, China, and Egypt. Later it was formed among the peoples of the ancient world – in Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome. As world religions have arisen, the sacred prohibitions were developed by theologians in Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Confucianism, and Buddhism.

The study of this cultural phenomenon in sociology, religiology, ethnography, culturology is aimed at describing its socio-cultural essence and causes of its occurrence in ancient society. On forming language as an informative communication system, taboo started to be expressed verbally, and in the development of languages, it acquired new cultural meanings. Modern representatives of linguistic and cultural communities began to perceive taboo as a linguistic and cultural tradition of word usage. The study of it as a linguocultural phenomenon is a description of linguo-cognitive and linguo-culturological mechanisms of taboo vocabulary and phraseology formation in the language, and the ways of their linguistic expression. Upon the mankind developing and the scientific and technological progress achievements, most prohibitions have become only a formal manifestation of ancient superstitions, traditions and cultural attitudes, but they hold a firm place in the people's everyday life. Over the centuries, the mental and ethical foundations of such prohibitions have changed, that, in our opinion, determines their preservation in the culture of thinking and behaviour of modern man.

## 2. Problem Statement

Despite the existence of taboos in almost all peoples of the world since ancient times, the systematic scientific study of it began only at the end of the XIX century. In foreign science, particularly in sociology, an English religious scholar and ethnologist Fraser (1963), a representative of classical English anthropology firstly introduced the term taboo into scientific circulation and described its socio-cultural nature. In the XIX–XXII chapters of the book "The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and

Religion" he systematized all the available facts about the taboo, the territory of its origin, the role in the social structure. Taboo is described in the form of forbidden actions, people and objects, and later the words and expressions. The basis to distinguish the taboo was the contraposition of the "spiritual, sacral" and "trivial". In the works of another English scientist, mathematician, logician and philosopher of the mid-XIX century, F.B. Jevons taboo is widely considered as the origins of modern morality. G. Spenser, an English philosopher and sociologist, referred ceremonial acts associated with primitive thinking to taboos.

In the XX century there emerged the works of the taboo by researchers Sternberg (1907), Wundt (1970) et al. The problem of taboo was also described in his works by Freud (1923), who considered it as a kind of talisman against danger, feelings of shame and guilt.

Taboo has been expressed in all languages of the world. Ullman (1970) attributed taboos in language to semantic universals, since taboo names and expressions in language reflect the universal, historically developed an understanding of the relationship of human with nature and his present place in the environment. Ullman (1970) writes:

*Language taboos arise mainly for the following reasons: firstly, it is necessary to note the cases of taboos, which owe their appearance to a sense of fear or "sacred horror" ... religious restrictions on the mention of the name of God; the cases, when superstition avoids calling by their names the dead, devil, evil spirits, and widespread taboos relating to the naming of animals. The second group of cases is dictated by a sense of delicacy: when such unpleasant topics as illness or death, physical or moral impairments, criminal acts as fraud, theft or murder, are mentioned... Thirdly, the prohibitions of the taboo type can arise from a desire to keep up appearances: these are the prohibitions that mention the phenomena relating to the sexual sphere, and certain parts and functions of the body. (para. 9)*

According to Breal (1948), the development of peyorative meaning in words and expressions is due to the "inherent human desire to cover, disguise terrible, offensive or repulsive objects" (p. 79).

The theoretical foundations of the study of euphemisms are presented in the works of B.A. Larin, L.A. Bulakhovsky, L.P. Krysin, V.P. Moskvina and other scientists. The linguistic aspect of the study of taboo as a socio-cultural phenomenon and its verbalization in modern linguistics is associated with the study of euphemisms. Euphemisms are "words and expressions that serve to replace such designations, which appear to the speaker undesirable, not quite polite, indecent or tactless" (Vildanova, 2008, p. 49). Euphemism is of great scientific interest. It is studied in the works exemplified by the Russian language (Baskova, 2006; Ivanyan, 2012; Kovaleva, 2008; Krysin, 1994; Vildanova, 2008), the English language (Baskova, 2006), the Spanish language (Rodchenko, 2000; Yakushina, 2009), the German language (Prudiyus, 2006), the Bashkir language (Mukhamedyanova, 2005), etc. As seen from the above list, euphemisms characterize the vocabulary and phraseology of any language.

According to Krysin (1994), euphemisms (from Greek. "euphony") are interchangeable words and expressions, some of which are inappropriate to use in public speaking out of a sense of "decency" and which are combined into the following thematic groups: 1) the names of some physiological processes

and human states; 2) the names of separate parts of a human body (namely the lower part of a trunk); 3) the words and expressions from the social sphere that are the veiled names of concepts, places, organizations, institutions, social processes and institutes. In the comparative aspect, the author considers euphemisms in the multi-authored monograph "Household Euphemisms in the Russian, Polish and English languages" (Ivanyan, 2012).

### 3. Research Questions

Being a linguistic universal, taboo and its expression in language is characterized by national and cultural specificity and, at the same time, depends on specific socio-cultural conditions of development of society in its certain historical period. The universal nature of prohibitions and superstitions is due to the way of development of human society when the ethnic cultural traditions have not yet formed. For example, superstitions associated with mirrors (the mirror symbolized the boundary between the worlds), with food (salt, bread), animals and birds (crow, spider, bat, black cat), etc., characterize the worldview of different peoples. However, each nation has peculiarities of taboo consolidation in its culture. So, many peoples banned the mention of totemic animals, they were designated by euphemisms: the bear used by Russians (*it is a master, Mikhailo Potapych, Toptygin*), the wolf used by Bashkirs and Yakuts (*a grey/blue primogenitor*), the weasel used by Italians and French (*a bride, small woman, sister-in-law*) and others. Hunting totem animals was forbidden. The killing of such animals, as ancient men believed, deprived the whole family of support. A black cat, on the superstitions of the Russians and some other peoples, symbolizes misfortune (the evil spirit force turned into it and it was represented itself as a werewolf), and contrary it symbolizes success and luckiness in the British.

National customs related to the world of the dead are still observed, but different ethnocultural communities have different traditions. In the Russian culture, it is impossible to give an even number of flowers, they are only for funerals or graves, and also the variety of flowers and colour is taboo among different peoples. Carnations are associated with bereavement in Germany, Sweden, and chrysanthemums – in Poland, Spain, Italy, Turkey. Yellow roses symbolize grief in Mexico, Chile, and it is associated with the colour of treason in Russia. Taboos in societies are different for men and women, for representatives of different social strata. They are expressed in the communicative process. For example, Vildanova (2008) writes about euphemisms as a manifestation of gender politeness, Baskova (2006) describes Euphemia in the language of mass media as a way of "classifying" social and political processes.

Experiencing the fear of the natural forces and the gods, evil spirits and the world of the dead, the ancient people resorted to the help of amulets, which acted as separate objects, rituals and conspiracies, food, and later – the prayers. One of the interesting customs is the long-standing custom of some peoples to give their children complex (double, triple) names to confuse the evil spirits that could harm the child.

Historically, the taboo was associated with the other world, with the deities and their punishment for offences, with the physical and material condition of man, the relationship of members of society. The evolution of taboo is to highlight the basis of prohibition: from the feeling of the sacred fear of the divine retribution, the damage from the evil spirits to the feeling of shame in front of other members of society. As Ullman (1970) noted in the work cited above, the taboo of the first type is gradually disappearing from people's lives and the taboo of the second type is increasing, although in the modern taboo of objects,

social institutions, the fear is partly reflected, for example, before punitive bodies, power structures, the fear of imprisonment, death sentence (not-so-distant lands, to go to jail /be behind bars, the highest measure of punishment). Nevertheless, in modern society, the taboo becomes to a greater extent a "label-forming" factor.

Language expression of taboo names, objects, actions and concepts can be different: 1) synonymous (*the lass is a prostitute*); 2) periphrastic expressions (*competent body authorities – Ministry of Internal Affairs, state security body, the Grim Reaper – death*); 3) phraseological units, which are based on the description of any ceremonies or customs (*Not the night be said, Spit over your left shoulder, Knock on wood, not to maleficiate*).

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

According to anthropocentric linguistics, taboo as a linguo-cultural phenomenon is studied from the evolution of human thinking, preservation of the mythological worldview in the linguistic world picture, as well as linguo-pragmatics. The purpose of this article is to systematize sociolinguistic, ethnographic and cultural properties of taboos and to identify the evolution of cultural prohibitions in the linguistic world picture, particularly, in phraseology.

#### **5. Research Methods**

The paper employs both general scientific methods and techniques of scientific research – collections, observations and descriptions of language material, and the methods of semantic analysis to describe the ways of formation of culturally marked meanings in words and phraseological units caused by taboos. The study is exemplified by the Russian phraseological units, the linguistic and cultural originality of which is motivated by various superstitions, omens, prohibitions. The leading method in the work is the linguo-cultural method, which allows to study the cultural space of the language in its integrity and to describe the culturally marked components.

#### **6. Findings**

In addition to taboo vocabulary (euphemisms), of great interest are stable turns of language, the figurative semantics of which takes the beginning with different cultural prohibitions. Phraseological turns in the Russian language can convey taboo subjects and concepts, the emergence of which is associated with the fear of ancient man before the sacred concepts, and with a sense of delicacy and decency in the communicative process.

A separate group of phraseological turns is formed by expressions denoting death and everything connected with it. Even the very designation of death is conveyed allegorically: *go to a better world, go to the forefathers, ascend to heaven, soul out, give up the spirit*. The condition of a person before death was also transmitted allegorically: *one foot in the grave, on incense breathes, to live out their days*. Actions aimed at causing damage to another person were tabooed. In the Russian language, these are the following phraseological turns: *to hound to death, to suck blood, send to eternity*. Such phraseological turns occur in other Slavic languages. In the Belarusian language, there is an outdated phraseological turn

to put on a sledge /sledge, in the Ukrainian language – to put on a woodcut, it is time for woodcut the meaning of which is motivated by the tradition existed in Russia to get rid of the elderly. Being put on a sledge, they were taken to the forest in winter and left there to die of starvation, or put on wood block sledge and pushed into a ravine in winter.

According to the superstitions of the ancients, you can not directly call the other world, the world of the dead: *in the afterlife, go to heaven, we will all be there one day, put him (her, you) the road*. An interesting fact is the designation of the other world with the help of pronouns, which, as it is known, do not have their own lexical meaning. Undesirable to call names of deceased people, under their mentioning the combinations of "the late, the deceased + name of" are used. Some turns include allegorical designations of the evil spirits: the evil one, the devil (*from evil, let the devil take you away*).

As part of the phraseology it was preserved the prohibitions on certain actions and deeds, reflecting the symbolism of a kind of amulet: *knock on tree* (not to maleficate), *spit through left shoulder* (on superstitions, for left leverage the evil force), *dibs on me* (dib is one of the East Slavic deities of patrimonial hearth, guarding the kind members), *spit three times* (three – the sacral number, protecting from the impure forces).

In Russian phraseology, especially in spoken and colloquial types, there are many expressions denoting the descriptive name of the human body parts that are indecent to call by their names. To refer to the buttocks, for example, it is used the following turns: *the fifth point, the soft spot, the place on the backside*. A certain state of a person can also be conveyed descriptively: *be in an interesting position, wait for replenishment* (pregnancy), *go to the ladies' room, go to powder your nose* (go to the toilet – about women), *Niagara falls* (vomiting).

It should be noted that many taboos in speech and behavioural communication have become just a tribute to traditions, although subconsciously a person is afraid of negative consequences if he violates these traditions, and observes them "just in case". This is especially true in the evening or at night. In the evening you cannot be debt repay, the money will not be there; cannot be cut hair and fingernails, to take the rubbish from home, to speak about spiritual forces and so on, for example: *not the night to be said*.

## 7. Conclusion

In the current study of the Russian phraseological turns motivated by various taboos, it was found that such turns reflect the worldview of ancient man in the phraseological world picture, but they do not interfere with modern communication. In the Russian language, they have lost their original meaning, but such expressions are often used in speech as a tribute to the linguistic and cultural tradition of word usage. The thematic organization of the analyzed units is caused by the bases of the emergence of taboos at different historical stages of development of human society. Fear and shame are the norms of verbal communication, the rules of etiquette. "...And now, in the second half of the XX century, people often intend to link events that are not connected in any way to get a simple answer about the cause of what happened. Here it is born superstition about opportunities on the distance to influence fate people the whether the action on any subject, then whether the word" – Its (1990, p. 245), a known historian and ethnographer, wrote.

Phraseological turns of taboo origin can be used in parallel meanings with the turns (words) that they replace depending on the speech situation, speech tactics and motives of the speakers.

Thus, although a large number of works is devoted to the problem of taboos and euphemisms as their linguistic expression, the problem remains relevant since language as an information and communication system and the linguistic and cultural phenomenon continues to develop. Nowadays, in interpersonal communication, the euphemisms, dating back to the taboo, perform not so much the function of a talisman, but, in the fair opinion of Degtyareva (2015), "they perform the main tactical and strategic task – to minimize ethical and legal risks" (p. 180). Although many taboos remain in the historical past, the language retains in its linguistic and cultural space the worldview of ancient man, which requires its decoding in the process of complex multidimensional analysis. And this gives new knowledge about the evolution of man and his language.

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