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Conference Paper

Linguistic Taboos in Karonese Culture

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Abstract

This paper investigates the linguistic taboos in the Karonese culture viewed from linguistic anthropology point of view. It concerns with the meaning of taboo based on performance, indexicality, and participation [4]. With this approach, linguistic taboos are explored not only from its lexical or words only, they are viewed from the process of communication totally, included lexical or words, the way to speak, the participants of speaking, and the contexts of communication. The theory used is proposed by Freud (1913/2004: 21), that taboo, on the one hand, is sacred, consecrated, and on the other uncanny, dangerous, forbidden, and unclean. Thus 'taboo' has about it a sense of something unapproachable and it is principally expressed in prohibitions and restrictions. Ethnographic method proposed by Spradley (1980) is applied in doing the research. The result shows that the linguistics taboos are classified into taboo in kinship, i.e. between *bengkila* and *permain*, *turangku* and *turangku*, and *mami* and *kela*; context-specific taboos, i.e. words derived from non-taboo words: such as organs of body, animals and supernatural entity, and certain words; and words related to social and physical defects: such as illness, death, and killing, and general taboos, i.e. swearing and unmentionable words. The swearing includes scatology or dirt, sexual organs, sexual acts, mothers or family, ancestors, animals, death, illness, and prostitution. Whereas, unmentionable words include dirty words relating to sex organs, sexual activities, bodily effluvia, micturition and defecation, and naming or addressing family and relatives.

Keywords: taboo, kinship, swearing, sexual

1. Introduction

All cultures and languages have taboo rules that served as a control for the community in making their communication. However, in societal life the rules are violated in some certain contexts and purposes. Breaking taboo rules makes people facing difficulties

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in relationship, because the words may offend and hurt others' feeling. Those words are associated with vulgar and sensitive things, such as sexual organs, sexual activity, dirt, etc., which are not considered suitable for scientific studies. At first glance, this assumption may be justified, but from another perspective, such research is urgently needed to provide cultural understanding for the community about its reasons and objectives. From a cultural perspective, it is expected to give a new dimension of understanding of the human psyche, as society is monitored in their way of expression by creating prohibitions and social sanctions towards certain verbal expressions. Speech ethics and prohibitions that are forged within the culture actually strengthen the society. Moreover, the prohibition of communicating directly in some kinship relationships in the Karonese culture makes the community more privileged and culturally diverse than others. The taboo rules that govern the community to stay away from communication with certain people, do not intend to weaken their relationships, even make their society stronger and have extraordinary manners.

1 2. Literature Review

2.1. What is taboo?

The English word 'taboo' derives from the Tongan *tabu*, discovered by Captain James Cook on 15 June 1777 in Polynesia on his first voyage to Tahiti (Allan & BurrIDGE, 2006:3; Freud, 1913/2004: 21). Broadly, taboo associated with certain activities that can be served as a means of social control. From this matter, it is suggested that taboo belongs to a part of cultural norms to be obeyed in order to avoid undesirable events. Meanwhile, Kridalaksana (1982: 161) provides two definitions of taboo, namely: (1) which is forbidden, both because of a harmful force (positive taboo) and because of the power that contaminates or destroys one's life force (negative taboo) avoided by using euphemism; (2) the prohibition of using certain words, for fear or for the sake of politeness; for instance, people do not call 'the dead' in front of the dead person.

2.2. Theoretical framework

The basis of this research is a theory proposed by Freud (1913/2004: 21), that taboo, on the one hand, is sacred, consecrated, and on the other uncanny, dangerous, forbidden, unclean. Thus 'taboo' has about it a sense of something unapproachable and it is principally expressed in prohibitions and restrictions. It is a cultural product, and then

all cultured tribes must have taboo. In an attempt to study linguistic taboo in Karonese culture, the researcher explored the meaning based on linguistic anthropology concept. Linguistic anthropology *studies language as a cultural resource and speaking as a cultural practice* (Duranti, 1997: 2). Furthermore, Duranti (1997: 14) said that in the study of meaning, it focuses on performance, indexicality, and participation. With this approach, linguistic taboo cannot be explored from its lexical or words only, it should be viewed from the process of communication totally, included lexical or words, the way to speak, the participants of speaking, and the contexts of communication. There are common words that lexically not reach the meaning of taboo, but when they are expressed in a certain way, or expressed by and to a particular person, or expressed in some certain contexts, the expression becomes taboo. That's why this article find the taboo meaning behind the use, misuse or non-use of language, its different forms, registers and styles (Foley, 1997: 3).

2.3. Related study

Some scholars have conducted related study and proposed classifications of taboos. Frazer (1913/1980: 318-418) had divided taboos into several classifications, but specifically for verbal taboo, he divides it into six categories, namely: 1) personal names tabooed; 2) names of relations tabooed; 3) names of the dead tabooed; 4) names of kings and of the sacred persons tabooed; 5) names of gods tabooed; and 6) common words tabooed. In this classification, Frazer does not classify words based on context or the manner of their usage in life. Allan and Burrige (2006), specifically discussed and classified the forbidden words into four main categories, namely: bad language, which is divided into (i) jargon, (ii) slang, and (iii) swearing; taboo naming and addressing; dirty words, which comprises (i) body organs covered by bikinis and swimsuits - because they are organs for the stimulation and satisfaction of sexual desire, and for the need for defecation and urinate; (ii) activities carried out with sex organs and bodily effluvia; (iii) body impurities released through the sex organs and bodily effluvia; bad fortune, which is divided into (i) disease, (ii) death, and (iii) killing. For this, they had given more detail classification. Different from Frazer and Allan and Burrige, Ljung (2011) analysed taboo specifically in swearing. He classified taboo into major and minor themes. In major theme, taboo is classified into (i) religious/supernatural, (ii) scatology, (iii) sex organs, (iv) sexual activity, (v) mother (family). In minor themes, the swearing is divided into (i) ancestors, (ii) scatology, (iii) death, (iv) illness, and (v) prostitution. While, Qanbar (2011) in her study investigated linguistic taboos in

Yemeni society in term of their relationship with the social context in which they are used and socio-cultural factors affecting their use. He classified taboos into two main categories: (i) context specific, (ii) general. Context specific taboos are divided into two sub categories: non-taboo words, and words related to the hearer's physical or social defects; while the sub categories under the category general include the unmentionable (the words under this subcategory should be euphemised in polite speech), and mentionable with minimizes.

3. Research Method

Qualitative approach is used to describe in depth the phenomenon of communication which violates the Karonese culture. In doing the research, the researcher applied some ethnographic methods proposed by Spradley (1980).

3.1. Data collection

This research was conducted in Karo District, Sumatera Utara province, Indonesia, which is inhabited by most Karo people. The data sought in this study are data of language and data of speaking. Data of language is in the form of Karo words or phrases that contains taboo literally, for example: *natu* 'penis', *teli* 'vagina', *tegis* 'cum', *entek-entek* 'intercourse', *tai* 'faces', *cih* 'pee', etc., which were obtained from the old native informants through in-depth interviews, and data of speaking is in the form of verbal expressions collected through participant-observation method.

3.2. Data analysis

In analyzing data, the researcher adopted four stages of ethnographic analysis proposed by Spradley (1980), namely: domain analysis, taxonomic analysis, component analysis, and theme analysis. Domain analysis was used to deepen the expressions that violate the norm of taboos. Taxonomic analysis was done to discover the internal structure of the taboos, and to classify taboos based on existing types. Componential analysis is a systematic search for the taboo components of meaning associated with cultural symbols. In other words, this stage of analysis was an attempt to explore the meaning contained in the symbols of the existing language. The theme analysis was to discover the values, norms or local wisdom in Karo community.

4. Discussion

4.1. Linguistic taboos in Karonese culture

Taboo in Karo²s mainly classified into three categories, they are: kinship, context-specific, and general.

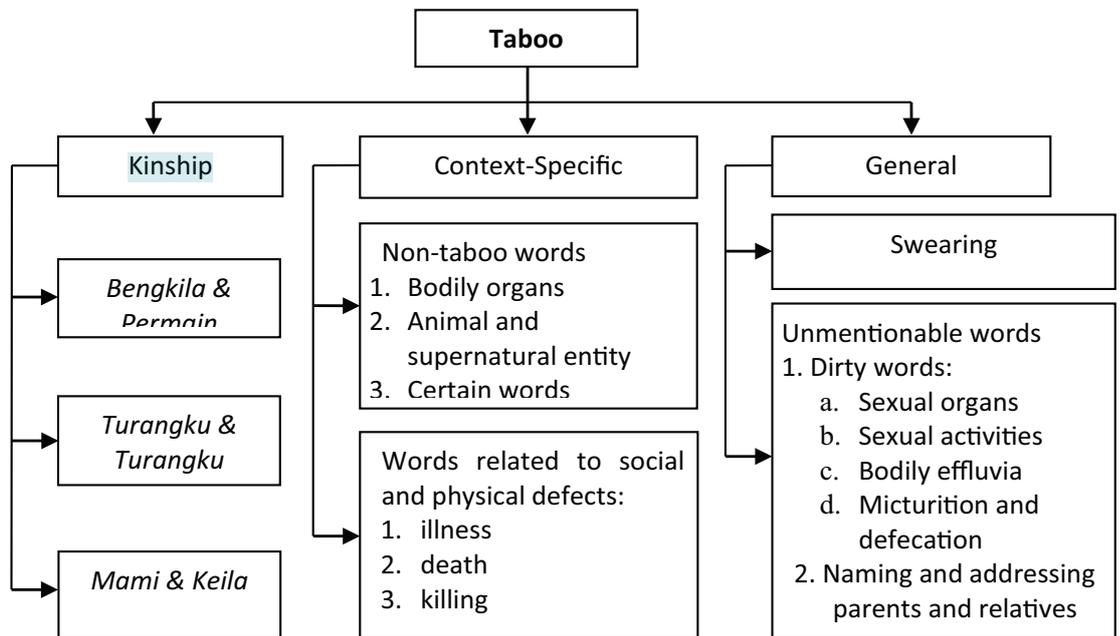


Figure 1: Linguistic Taboos in Karonese Culture.

4.1.1. Kinship taboo

Marriage does not merely unite two families through a sacred spiritual bond between a man from one family and a woman from the other family, but also creates a restriction or a ban on communication. The restriction or prohibition in communication begins since a *mukul* event (a cultural event in a night after the wedding party held in groom's family's house). After this *mukul*, the two families are considered taboo in making direct communication in three kinships, they are *bengkila* (father-in-law/husband's father) and *permain* (daughter-in-law), *turangku* (wife of wife's brother) and *turangku* (husband of husband's sister), and *mami* (mother-in-law/wife's mother) and *keila* (son-in-law). To make it easy to understand, the taboo in the kinship concerned can be seen in the figure below:

In Karo culture, the six family members in those three categories of kinship are considered taboo to engage in direct speaking. The taboo in these relations is not the same as taboos in other categories, which is considered taboo to say certain words that

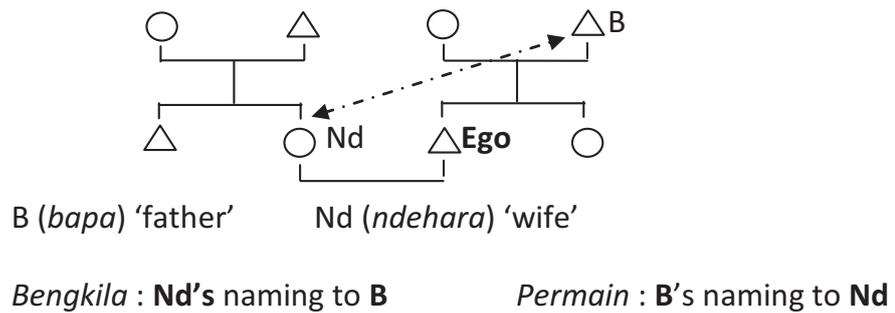
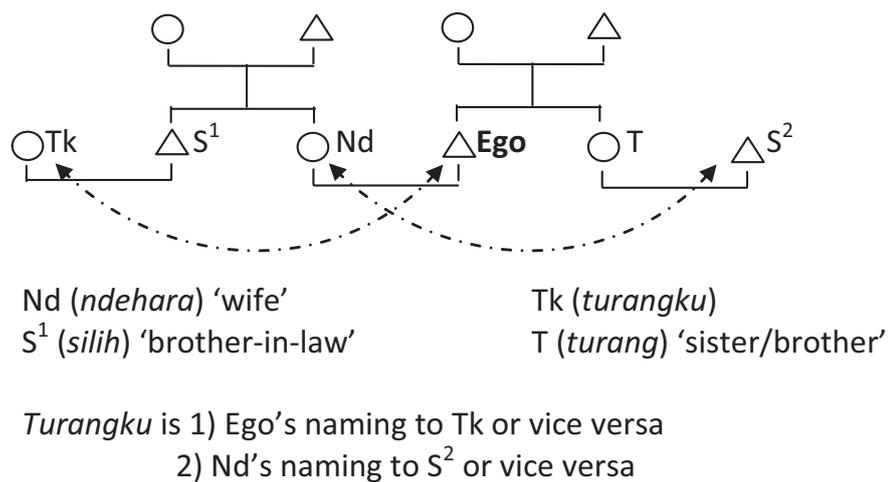
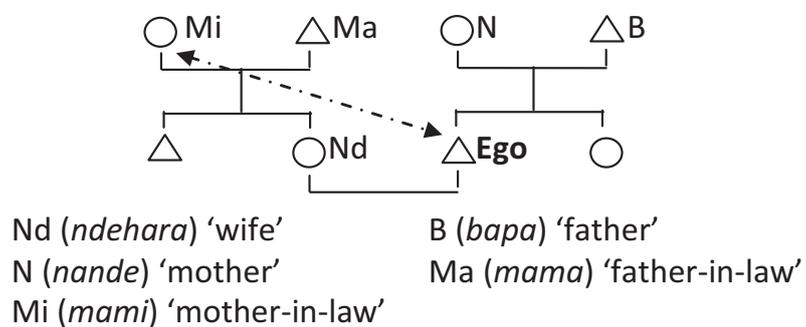


Figure 2: Taboo in kinship between *bengkila* - *permain*.



3 Figure 3: Taboo in kinship between *turangku* - *turangku*.



Mami is Ego's naming to Mi, while *Keila* is Mi's naming to Ego

Figure 4: Taboo in kinship between *mami* - *keila*.

reach the sacredness and profanity. They should avoid communicating directly, unless they will break the norms of culture. The norm is applied to maintain high courtesy towards their new relatives from other family so that all disputes among the families can be avoided.

4.1.2. ²Context-specific taboo

This category includes words that have no taboo meaning lexically, but their use in certain contexts make them taboo. This category is further divided into two sub categories: non-taboo words and words related to social and physical defects.

1. Non-taboo Words

The sub category of non-taboo words can also be divided into bodily organs, animal and supernatural entity, and certain words. Organs of body which include in this category are: *babah* 'mouth', *mata* 'eye', and *takal* 'head'. Lexically, the three organs of body do not reach the meaning of taboo, but they are taboo in the context of swearing. Some animals also considered taboo in certain context. The names of animals that are used by Karo society in the context of swearing are *babi* 'pig', *biang* 'dog', *kerbo* 'buffalo', and *bengkala* 'monkey'. The names of these animals do not mean taboo lexically, but in the context of use they represent taboo meanings because of poor judgment by speech community due to the bad nature attached to the animals, that causing pain to the interlocutors. The speakers use these animals' names to humiliate the interlocutors to the state of the animals concerned.

Karo society also considers taboo to name ²wild animals namely *arimo* 'tiger', *nipe* 'snake', and *gajah* 'elephant' and a supernatural entity namely *begu* 'ghost'. Those do not mean taboo lexically, but they are taboo in a place believed to be inhabited by them, like jungle. Those malignant creatures are believed to appear suddenly and attack people mentioned their name. Karo society are also prohibited from mentioning and buying *paku* 'nails', and *jarum* 'needles' specifically at night, because they may be harmful others when those things fall in the way to take them home.

2. ²Words related to social and physical defects

In general, all people must have their social and physical weaknesses, and they will feel hurt when the weaknesses mentioned. Words related to social and physical defects are words related to a very embarrassing disease or illness, related to death, and killing. The illnesses are *mehadou* 'insane or crazy', *tabun* 'epilepsy', *gadam* 'leprosy', and *peintang* 'blind'. Words related to death are *mate*, *munggil* 'die'. Words related to killing are *bunuh* 'kill' and *geleh* 'slaughter'. All words will be considered taboo whenever such words are directed to people concerned.

4.1.3. General taboo

Most of cultured tribe in this world has the same perception to this kind of taboo. This category consists of swearing and unmentionable words.

1. Swearing

Swearing is verbal expression containing words expressed with a louder intonation than the usual speech. It is understandable that a person who does swearing is in a high emotional state due to undesirable situation. The words are expressed in a loud and rough voice, usually followed by sharp eyes to the interlocutors. The words of this category are related to scatology or dirt, sexual organs, sexual acts, and matters related to mothers or family, ancestors, animals, death, illness, and prostitution. Karonese words included in scatology are *tai/ngengek* 'shit' and *patat/ikur* 'ass'. This scatology refers to dirty words related to human excretions. Sexual organs that are frequently used in swearing are *natu* 'penis/cock', and *teli/pepek* 'pussy/vagina'. Sexual activity is an activity to perform sexual intercourse with the use of the sexual organs or genitals. Karonese words related to this kind of activity are *entek/entek-entek* 'fuck/shag' and *merus-merus* 'masturbation'. *Entek/entek-entek* is a sexual activity done as a husband and his wife do. *Merus-merus* is a sexual activity done by man personally. In mother or family category, Karonese words which are frequently used in swearing are *ame* 'mother', and *bapa* 'father'. In the ancestor's category, Karo society usually uses *nini* 'grandmother' and *nini bulang* 'grandfather' in swearing.

Parents and ancestors are the honorable family members that must be respected. That's why, Karo society will be very resentful to hear their honorable names served in swearing. Animals that are usually used in swearing are *babi* 'pig', *biang* 'bitch/dog', *kerbo* 'buffalo', and *bengkala* 'monkey' as has been stated in the previous part. In the category of death, Karo society uses *mate/munggil/tes* 'die' to curse others. In the category of illness or disease, Karo society frequently uses *mehadou/adon* 'insane/crazy', *peintang* 'blind', and *pinangko* 'thief' in swearing others. The last category for this kind of swearing is prostitution. Word that is usually used by Karo society is *lonte* 'bitch'.

2. Unmentionable Words

This category is considered taboo and should never be mentioned. It is not because of the conditions and the way of pronouncing the words, but because of nature and

basic meaning of words or objects they refer to. The words concerned related to things that have to be covered and avoided from the sight of other people for the sake of sacredness and profanity. Words classified to this category are dirty words that can also be classified into sexual organs, sexual activities, bodily effluvia, micturition and defecation. Sexual organs that should not be mentioned are *natu* 'penis', *naruh-naruh* 'testicles', *teli/pepek* 'vagina', *nonon/nenen* 'boobs', *patat* 'ass', *gerem* 'pubic hair'. For sexual activities, Karo people are prohibited to mention *entek-entek/ngentek* 'fuck/shag', *merus-merus* 'blowjob/masturbation', and *tegir* 'erect'. For dirt, Karo people are prohibited to mention *tai/ngengek/berak* 'feces', *tegis* 'cum/sperm', and *kesut* 'fart'. For defecation and micturition, to say *ngengek/ciret/berak/ertai* 'defecation', *ciah/kencing* 'micturition' are forbidden. Those kinds of words should not be mentioned publicly.

Beside the dirty words, Karonese culture also forbids the societies to mention their parents' name and to mention the name of their older and higher level of relatives. They are also considered taboo to address them by *engko* 'you', *enter* 'go there', *ariko* 'you come here', and the suffixes *-ko/-mu/-m* 'you'.

5. Conclusions

¹ To the researcher's knowledge, there has no study about taboo in Karonese language that provides detailed information so far. Taboo study will not provide complete information if the study is based on lexical meaning only. Since taboo is a culture norm, it must be explored in the context of its usage. The taboo rule actually provides specific way to avoid it in communication, since the researcher has been given a very narrow space to write, the techniques and euphemism form cannot be given in this opportunity and will be reported on another occasion.

¹ Karo is one of cultured tribes in the world which has strict norms in maintaining the relationships within its community. Culturally, the community is ruled such a way in language and their way of speaking to avoid friction, disputes, and even quarrels among family members and closed relatives. The rules in communication created by the ancestors to become a culture, aims to inculcate the attitude of courtesy and to foster social awareness to respect one another, so that the family harmony is maintained. However, some of these taboo rules, especially in kinship taboo, have begun to be eroded and begin to be violated by society, for an assumption that it can impede communication, and is considered inconsistent with the condition of this modern era. Based on this assumption, the researcher supports other researchers to find out the

truth of how crucial this taboo prevents society in communications and in what way the society abandoned the taboos.

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