


Taboo language research in the new millennium. A literature review

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Abstract: Taboo and taboo naming are not single, unified phenomena that can be addressed from a single perspective. Indeed, in the last twenty-five years, linguistic research on taboo avoidance and taboo breaking, that is, on euphemism and dysphemism, has spanned across different, yet interconnected, linguistic fields, including cognitive semantics, discourse studies, pragmatics and sociolinguistics, among others. In this regard, the goal of this paper is to offer an overview of the state of work in taboo-related research in the twenty-first century (2000-2024) in the Anglophone academic context and, by doing so, make the existing work accessible to a wide academic community. This study provides insights into the academic disciplines involved in taboo language research, main publication formats, most cited publications and relevant journals in the field. The literature review shows that discourse analysis, sociolinguistics and pragmatics rank the most relevant research disciplines, followed, at a distance, by cognitive semantics, psycholinguistics and translation studies. Accordingly, the academic journals publishing work on taboo-related language range from those that are general in scope to others devoted to specific research areas or subjects, which shows the interdisciplinary nature of taboo language research in the new millennium.

Keywords: Taboo; euphemism; dysphemism; linguistic interdiction; literature review

ESP Investigación sobre el tabú lingüístico en el nuevo siglo. Una revisión bibliográfica

Resumen: El tabú y el tabú lingüístico no son fenómenos que se puedan analizar desde una única perspectiva. De hecho, en los últimos 25 años, en la investigación sobre la atenuación y ruptura del tabú en el lenguaje, es decir, sobre el eufemismo y el disfemismo, han participado diferentes, aunque complementarias, disciplinas lingüísticas, como la semántica cognitiva, el análisis del discurso, la pragmática y la sociolingüística. En este sentido, el presente estudio ofrece una visión panorámica de la investigación sobre el tabú lingüístico en el siglo XXI (2000-2024) en el contexto académico anglosajón: principales disciplinas aplicadas a la investigación sobre el tabú lingüístico, formatos de publicación, publicaciones de mayor impacto y revistas académicas más relevantes. La revisión bibliográfica que aquí se presenta demuestra que el análisis del discurso, la sociolingüística y la pragmática son las disciplinas más destacadas, seguidas, a cierta distancia, por la semántica cognitiva, la psicolingüística y la traductología. Así, las revistas científicas que publican trabajos sobre el tabú verbal incluyen tanto aquellas de orientación más generalista como las que se centran en disciplinas concretas o temas específicos, lo que demuestra la naturaleza multi- e interdisciplinar de la investigación sobre el tabú lingüístico en el nuevo milenio.

Palabras clave: Tabú; eufemismo; disfemismo; interdicción lingüística; revisión bibliográfica

Contents: 1. Introduction. 2. Taboo and taboo naming: setting the scene. 3. Research on taboo language: developments and evolution. 4. Methodological aspects. 5. Findings and discussion. 6. The present and future of taboo language research. 7. Concluding remarks.

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1. Introduction

Taboo is intrinsically linked to danger, to social conflict, to the forbidden. Actually, in its conception, the Tongan word *taboo* refers to some kind of forbidden behaviour that is deemed to be harmful and dangerous to individuals or to the society as a whole (Burridge 2017). Taboo, however, is far from being just a synonym for the forbidden and for the unspeakable. Allan (2019b, 3) defined taboos as “proscriptions of behavior arising out of social constraints on the individual’s behavior where it is perceived to be a potential cause of discomfort, harm or injury”. Although taboos are a source of interpersonal conflict that tend to comprise a threat of some kind, as Brass-Rosenfield (2022) argues, or precisely for this reason, taboo language has never disappeared from people’s mouths. Indeed, words of attenuation and offence pervade the language that we use when speaking about taboo topics, no matter how untouchable, forbidden or shameful they may be.

In spite of the fact that taboo is an integral part of language, a systematic research on this area of human communication did not start to take shape until relatively recently with the seminal works *La interdicción lingüística. Mecanismos del eufemismo y disfemismo* (Casas Gómez 1986) and *Euphemism and Dysphemism. Language Used as Shield and Weapon* (Allan and Burridge 1991), which can be considered the first serious and extensive examinations of euphemism and its counterpart dysphemism in Spanish and Anglophone research respectively. These two pioneering linguistic works on the manifestation of taboo in language, together with Jay’s (1992) linguistic and psychological study on swearing, anger expression and offensiveness, contributed to legitimising taboo language as a worthwhile object of study and cleared the way for the significant rise in research output on this field in the last decades (Miller 2020; Keller et al. 2021b, 6).

Euphemism and dysphemism, as the manifestations of taboo in language and communication, go beyond a lexical response to taboo topics; rather, an analysis of the verbal expression of taboo concepts allows us to understand how the taboo is conceived and understood in different societies and cultures, what value judgements are more or less implicitly rejected or legitimised and the rules that regulate censorship, and self-censorship, in discourse. In other words, the analysis of the way taboo projects in language, as Ivy (2022, 444) puts it, “offers an opportunity to examine why some subjects are difficult to discuss—why some subjects give many people pause and anxiety, often leading to embarrassment, inappropriateness, and communication avoidance”. After all, we should bear in mind that the verbal expression of taboo realities and behaviours is as much a sociocultural phenomenon as a linguistic one.

The verbal manifestations of taboo, mostly – but not exclusively – euphemistic, have been studied from different perspectives and linguistic frameworks, from historical semantics and structuralism to pragmatics and cognitive semantics (see Casas Gómez 2018). The empirical and theoretical literature on taboo language has spanned across different linguistic fields and crossed a number of neighbouring disciplines outside linguistics such as anthropology, sociology, theology or clinical studies, among others, which provides evidence of the interdisciplinary or, more precisely, transdisciplinary nature of this field of research.¹

The goal of this paper is to offer an overview of the state of work in taboo-related research in the twenty-first century (2000–2024) organised by publication format, research discipline, academic journal and citation impact and, by doing so, make the existing work accessible to a wide academic community. This task seems to be justified, because there has only been so far a serious attempt to compile research on taboo-induced language which dates back to the early 1990s (Gray 1992). More recent overviews of this field of study present some weaknesses: Burridge’s (2017) includes a rather limited compilation of research on euphemism and dysphemism and Wang’s (2017) exclusively focuses on the study of taboo in China by Chinese researchers. Other specialised bibliographical revisions on taboo-related language focus on specific subjects: Motschenbacher’s (2012) bibliography is specifically devoted to studies dealing exclusively with the interplay between language, gender and sexuality and Miller’s (2020) review of literature on taboo language is focused on (and limited to) four topics: linguistic avoidance behaviour, transgression, language contact situations and educational settings. This is why a general overview of recent research carried out in this field in the Anglophone academic context seems necessary as a way to offer the reader a comprehensive and updated picture of taboo language research, i.e. euphemism, dysphemism and related phenomena.

The study begins with some theoretical considerations regarding taboo, euphemism and dysphemism and proceeds to the summary of the stages that can be distinguished in the evolution of the theoretical definitions and analytical approaches to taboo language research since the early studies published in the 1960s and the 1970s. Afterwards, the method followed in compiling and analysing the publications is explained. The next section is devoted to presenting a literature review of taboo language research in the twenty-first century by publication format, research discipline, journal and citation impact, which constitutes the core of this article. Some comments on the present and future of research activity in the field of taboo-related language will bring this study to an end.

2. Taboo and taboo naming: setting the scene

As pointed out in the preceding section, taboo is a complex phenomenon that cannot be understood from a single perspective or categorised easily. As Keller et al. (2021b, 6) argue, taboo “remains a large umbrella term for a wide range of restrictions which are culturally and historically dependent”.² What seems evident

¹ That taboo language is not a unified or homogeneous research field is amply demonstrated in the chapters that make up the collective volumes *Taboo in Discourse. Studies on Attenuation and Offence in Communication* (Crespo-Fernández 2018) and *The Oxford Handbook of Taboo Words and Language* (Allan 2019a).

² See Keller et al. (2021b) for an all-encompassing definition of taboo and a typology of its linguistic forms and possible communicative functions.

is that taboo is, first and foremost, a social phenomenon; more precisely, following Schröder (2008), a sociocultural restriction that affects different social domains, namely those of action, language and communication. Taboos exert social pressures and restrictions upon individuals and groups to conform to certain social expectations and shape behaviours by creating norms and triggering specific emotional responses. As Keller et al. (2021b, 12) claim, “taboos wield significant social power as they elicit predictable or expected behaviour and largely go unquestioned; in this way, they contribute to the stability of societies and social groups”. From this point of view, taboos serve a primarily social function: to guarantee stability and protection in the community.

Taboo cannot be considered a relic of the past; rather, it is a universal, perennial phenomenon that has kept its force largely intact despite the passing of time and changing trends in society. In Chamizo Domínguez’s (2009, 428) words, taboo “continues being as alive in our technological society as it has been in any society of the past or might be found nowadays in the most isolated tribe one might imagine”. And this is so probably because the motivations for adhering to taboos, namely fear, modesty and civility, have always been strong.³ Therefore, the taboo has always had (and still has) the power to shape human communication by censoring discussion of those topics deemed embarrassing, immoral or shameful such as death, sex, incest, dishonesty, madness or disease, just to mention a few. As Burrridge (2002, 199) once put it, taboo is “revolting, untouchable, filthy, unmentionable, dangerous, disturbing, thrilling – but above all powerful”. And this power explains why the taboo has never ceased to exist.

Probably because the content of the taboo is considered disturbing and offensive, as already said, taboo exerts a strong attraction on people. In fact, rarely is taboo avoided: taboo avoidance strategies coexist with taboo breaking when referring to forbidden topics in communication. This paradoxical nature of taboo makes language users react with emotional ambivalence and oscillate between “attraction and repulsion, worship and condemnation”, in Punter’s (1996) words. This ambivalence towards taboo topics is expressed through a diversity of linguistic expressions with different emotive values ranging from *euphemism* or “attenuated expression” (i.e. the process whereby the taboo reality is stripped of its most explicit overtones thus providing a means to refer to delicate or uncomfortable topics in conversation) to *dysphemism* or “offensive expression” (i.e. the process whereby the pejorative traits of the taboo concept are highlighted with an offensive intention). Both euphemisms and dysphemisms are a response to taboo in communication: speakers use language either as a protective shield or as a weapon against others. That this is so can be gathered from Allan and Burrridge (2006, 2): “Language is used as a shield against malign fate and the disapprobation of human fellow beings; it is used as a weapon against enemies and as a release valve when we are angry, frustrated or hurt”. Otherwise said, speakers may either use polite, evasive, sweet sounding language or, by contrast, turn to harsh and offensive language in the form of swearwords, slurs or derogatory epithets that are used “for being offensive, for being abusive or just plain letting off steam” (Burrridge 2002, 221). Furthermore, as language users also employ taboo-inspired terms that are neither evasive nor offensive, Allan and Burrridge (1991; 2006) also proposed the category of orthophemism or “attenuated expression”, that which provides the speaker with an axiological neutral alternative to refer to the taboo. In this regard, taboo-related vocabulary can be placed along a X-phemistic continuum (see Figure 1), as defined by these scholars, ranging from euphemism to dysphemism, that is, from the socially acceptable *pass away* to the disrespectful *kick the bucket* through the neutral *die*. These modalities of taboo-naming provide the speaker with different alternatives to refer to taboo concepts that differ in connotation but share the same denotation. Indeed, *pass away*, *die* and *kick the bucket* all denote the same event, that of dying, but the expressions have different connotative or expressive meanings that range from attenuation to offence.

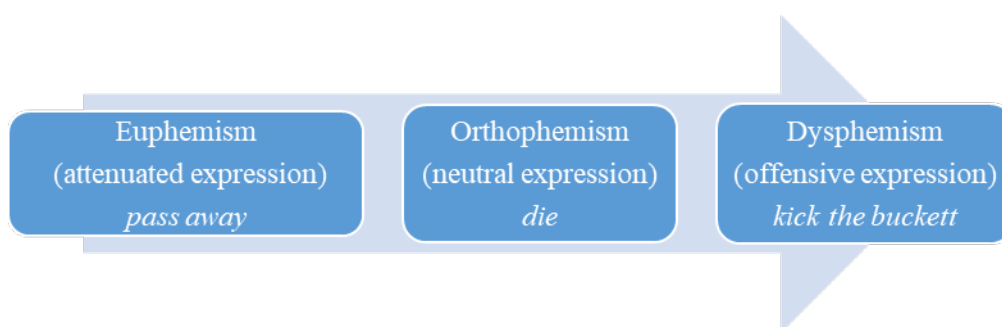


Figure 1: X-phemistic continuum

When it comes to categorising taboo-related language in real discourse contexts, it is sometimes difficult to know where to draw the line between the attenuated or preferred expression and the offensive or dispreferred expression, that is, between euphemism and dysphemism. Therefore, Allan and Burrridge (1991) proposed other X-phemistic categories of taboo naming, namely dysphemistic euphemism and euphemistic dysphemism, which roughly correspond with quasi-euphemism and quasi-dysphemism in Crespo-Fernández’s (2007, chap. 4; 2015) terminology. Whereas the former includes those taboo-related words and

³ These motivations behind taboo apply to different taboo areas, namely the supernatural, death and illness (fear), sex and bodily functions (modesty) and social conflict (civility). On the motivations and categories of taboo, see Crespo-Fernández (2007, 27-29).

expressions that are used positively, as a means to display intimacy, in-group cohesion, or friendship, in spite of their apparently dysphemistic locution, the latter consists of those units that are intentionally offensive despite their socially acceptable, i.e., euphemistic, disguise. It is the particular context in which they are uttered that determines the X-phemistic value of taboo-induced language. Indeed, the analysis of taboo language, as a phenomenon that occurs in real language production, involves looking at the pragmatic context as a key factor in determining the illocutionary force of a X-phemistic utterance. As Allan and Burridge (1991, 4) argue, the mitigating or offensive quality of a taboo-related word or expression depends on contextually-dependent factors such as the speaker's purpose and the degree of formality of the communication setting, among others.

To complicate matters further, X-phemism, i.e., euphemism, dysphemism or orthophemism, is materialised through a diversity of linguistic mechanisms and strategies that belong to different language levels: phonetic distortions (*fudge* 'fuck'), rhyming slang (*Bristol cities* 'titties'), compounding (*fuckface* 'stupid person'), clipping (*Paki* 'Pakistani'), borrowings (*femme fatale* 'seductive woman'), learned terms (*paedophile* 'addicted to sexual love with children'), hyperbole (*triumphal entry* 'copulation'), understatement (*sleep* 'die') and, above all, metaphor (*enemy* 'cancer') and metonymy (*go to the bathroom* 'defecate').⁴ Indeed euphemistic and dysphemistic expressions are, in many cases, figurative, as demonstrated in a previous work on X-phemistic sex-related language (Crespo-Fernández 2015). The wide range of verbal resources that participate in the creation of euphemistic and dysphemistic words and expressions, regardless of the register (formal, colloquial or slang) provides evidence for the linguistic creativity and word play surrounding taboo topics (Burridge and Benczes 2019). From all this it can be deduced that although taboo is universal, its linguistic manifestations are quite diverse and subject to a variety of specific contextual factors.

From what has been said so far, it seems clear that taboo and taboo naming are rather complex phenomena that cannot be addressed from a single perspective, not only because the list of taboo topics is almost endless, including sex and sexuality, death and dying, bodily functions, illness, money, scatology, the sacred, racism or ageism, to mention a few, but also because the degree to which a taboo topic is considered offensive, threatening or unmentionable in a community evolves over time (Burridge and Benczes 2019). Indeed, taboo applies to that language behaviour perceived to be harmful to a social community at a given time, which ultimately can lead to some form of social or even legal sanction.⁵ In our modern Western societies, the need to eradicate from language any offense towards minorities is especially evident: agism, sexism and racism, for example, are socially banned in public discourse, whereas sex is not subject to the same degree of censorship nowadays as it used to be some decades ago. In fact, taboos, and taboo avoidance strategies, do not only evolve over time; they also vary from community to community, and from society to society and so do the consequences for taboo breaking. Absolute taboos, as such, do not exist. As Allan (2019b, 14) summarises, "[n]othing is taboo for all people under all circumstances for all time".

The taboo is therefore changing and sensitive to time and context, and so are its verbal manifestations. Indeed, euphemisms may become contaminated over time and degenerate into dysphemisms, a phenomenon which is common in PC (politically correct) language, a linguistic behaviour intended to avoid words relating to gender, sex, race, age or disabilities that could be offensive to minorities (see Fairclough 2003; Allan and Burridge 2006, chap. 4). Take, for example, the terms used to refer to people with some sort of intellectual disability. *Retarded* and *mentally retarded*, widely used as euphemistic substitutes for the once acceptable medical terms *subnormal* or *imbecile* until the first half of the twentieth century, came to be considered derogatory and were replaced by *mentally handicapped* which was, in turn, substituted by the more neutral *intellectually disabled* or *mentally challenged* in the 1990s. This periodic replacement of words that have acquired negative overtones with new politically correct (hence euphemistic) ones was dubbed as the "Euphemism treadmill" (Pinker 2002). In any case, we should bear in mind that although the taboo lexicon changes over time along with people's perception of the taboo topic, the purpose of taboo remains unaltered: to guarantee social stability and prevent conflict, as already pointed out.

It is important to note that X-phemistic processes are in no way limited to a word-for-word substitution at the lexical level. In fact, the X-phemistic alternatives to the taboo do not depart from the taboo word itself but from the taboo concept or reality, as Casas Gómez (2009; 2018) maintains. This is why, in line with this author, a difference should be made between the linguistic taboo (or word taboo), restricted exclusively to the lexical level, and concept taboo, or forbidden reality, as the base for taboo-related naming. Such difference makes it possible to consider euphemism and dysphemism as cognitive mechanisms of conceptualisation of a forbidden reality or, in other words, strategies of conceptual modelling, either attenuated or intensified, of those negative meanings that are present in taboo concepts.

As discourse focuses on the processes of interaction between the participants in the communicative act – production and interpretation – in specific situations of language use, taboo naming, given its context-dependent nature, can be best analysed in discourse. In this line, Schröder (2008) focused on the rhetorical force of X-phemism as a pragmatic mechanism that serves specific communicative and social functions. Indeed, the X-phemistic alternatives to taboo concepts are socially oriented and perform specific discourse functions ranging from protection and consolation to praise, provocation, manipulation,

⁴ See Warren (1992), Linfoot-Ham (2005) and Crespo-Fernández (2007, 117-118) for taxonomies of the linguistic mechanisms employed in the formation of X-phemistic units.

⁵ Miller (2020, 18) brings attention to a case of taboo language use which is significant of the power of certain taboos nowadays: in 2020, a white professor at the University of Southern California was suspended for saying a Chinese word that sounds like a racial slur in English.

abuse or humiliation, to name a few. As a consequence, we can speak of a variety of sometimes overlapping X-phemistic types that take their names from the functions that the words and expressions perform in discourse (cf. Burridge 2012; Crespo-Fernández 2015): protective (*mobility impaired* 'disabled'), consolatory (*fall sleep* 'die'), provocative (*happy ending* 'sexual service including ejaculation'), underhand (*monetary disorder* 'bankruptcy'), uplifting (*administrative assistant* 'secretary') or ludic (*trouser snake* 'penis'), among others. From this discourse-oriented perspective, we should necessarily admit the existence of contextually-dependent and unpredictable alternatives to taboo concepts that emerge as spontaneous uses in specific situational contexts in which they acquire their communicative force and expressive values (Casas Gómez 2018, 15). This discursive approach to taboo naming makes it possible to consider X-phemistic language as a three-faceted phenomenon with a linguistic, social and communicative dimension, which has paved the way for research on the sociocultural implications underlying taboo language use in different discourse practices, as explained in the following section.

3. Research on taboo language: developments and evolution

Research involving taboo language has never been an easy task. In the late 1970s, Timothy Jay addressed certain methodological problems for conducting research on taboo words: first, how to define the category of these words; and second, how to obtain accurate data on the frequency and offensiveness of these words (Jay 2020). Despite the growing body of research on taboo that has come to light over the past decades, to these problems, which still remain according to this author, there are others that should be added, such as the description of the brain mechanisms that underly swearing and the complexity of accounting for cross-cultural differences.

To the problems raised by Jay, for Pizarro Pedraza (2018b, 2) there are issues, both linguistic and extralinguistic, involved in taboo word research that can help to explain the delay in research in this field (see Introduction). First, the extralinguistic factors deriving from the social stigma and censorship surrounding certain taboos; indeed, some taboo areas (incest or paedophilia, for instance) are not only shameful or immoral, but also illegal, and tend to favour a secret language unknown to outsiders. Second, the complexity of researching a phenomenon of speech which, as such, occurs in real language use and is subject to contextual variation and unpredictability. As a consequence, it is sometimes difficult to establish a dividing line between the different X-phemistic categories of taboo naming.

Although context plays a key role in the explanation of language behaviour regarding taboo, taboo-related language has not always been approached from a discursive pragmatic perspective. As summarised in what follows, four main stages can be distinguished in the evolution of the theoretical definitions and analytical approaches to taboo-related language and X-phemistic naming (see Casas Gómez 2018, 20-27; Fernández Smith and Casas Gómez 2018).

Early work on taboo and language include classical studies belonging to the field of historical and traditional semantics that primarily conceive taboo as a psychological cause of semantic change (Ullmann 1964). This initial stage is related to the birth of semasiology as the scientific study of meaning from a linguistic standpoint in the nineteenth century. This discipline, as Casas Gómez (2018: 22) explains, is based on the German model of signification that embraces two different theoretical approaches: a logical and a psychological one, supported by Heerdegen and Hey respectively.

The second stage, which goes back to the origins of modern semantics, spans until the late seventies and early eighties. In this phase, the influence of the structuralist paradigm led to studies in the fields of semantics, lexicology, lexicography and dialectology in which euphemism and, less commonly, dysphemism, were narrowly, and wrongly, defined by such authors like Hatzfeld, Bruneau or Baldinger (cited in Casas Gómez 2009, 727-729) as merely lexical alternatives to linguistic taboos, that is, as the result of a substitution process at the lexical level.

The third stage starts in the mid 1980s and spans until the end of the twentieth century. Although the lexical treatment of taboo-related language has not totally disappeared, researchers on this field started to notice that the traditional and structuralist approaches are too limiting to account for the complexity of the phenomenon of taboo language; indeed, Casas Gómez (1986), Allan and Burridge (1991), Warren (1992) and Burridge (1996), among others, started to understand the phenomenon of taboo naming in discursive and pragmatic terms, which paved the way for the analysis of euphemism and dysphemism as social and cultural phenomena that are dependent on a diversity of contextually-related factors (speaker's intentions, politeness conventions, etc.) and are meant to produce particular effects. It was at this stage when the phenomenon of political correctness, a form of language censorship, started to invade the lexicon of gender, age, race or disabilities, i.e. the so-called new taboos, with euphemistic words intended to avoid stigmatising language in public communication (Andrews 1996; Burridge 1996). From this perspective, the study of taboo language was in no way limited to a lexical substitution, as sociolinguistic, pragmatic and cognitive aspects started to play a role in describing X-phemistic processes.

The fourth stage includes those works published in the twenty-first century which develop the discursive approach to euphemism and dysphemism initiated in the 1980s and moved towards a cognitive conception of these phenomena whereby euphemism and dysphemism are seen as cognitive processes of conceptualisation of new/old realities that align with communicative functions in specific situations of language use. In the new millennium, it is taken for granted that a pragmatically and socially-oriented approach to taboo-related language must necessarily be adopted in order to gain an insight into the role of euphemism and dysphemism within the complex dynamics of discourse. From this perspective, the speaker's

language choice responds to particular communicative intentions and is conditioned by contextual factors of a pragmatic nature. The edited volumes (see, for instance, Crespo-Fernández 2018; Pizarro Pedraza 2018a; Allan 2019a; Keller et al. 2021a) and research articles published in the last decade (e.g. Chovanec 2019; Ralph and Ralph 2019; Sánchez Ruiz and López Cirugeda 2019; Heidepeter and Reutner 2022; Crespo-Fernández 2023), typically supported by evidence from real language data, are good cases in point of the emphasis placed on taboo language as a discursive phenomenon that is to be found in a wide range of social contexts and discourse types, including political speeches, internet forums and tweets, television series, advertisements, epitaphs, etc. All these studies reflect that taboo naming (be it euphemistic or dysphemistic) is not a black and white phenomenon: it is not only used to avoid or provoke offence, but serves a variety of communicative purposes: to attract someone's interest, to deceive and misrepresent, to upgrade and magnify, to display in-group identity or to trigger laughter intentionally, among others. In this vein, research on political correct language, mostly euphemistic, has continued in the discourses of sexism (Mills 2003) or social discrimination (Halmari 2011), to mention but a couple of examples.

In the last few years, research on taboo language shows a tendency towards computational linguistics. Departing from the assumption that, in order to understand human language completely, machines need to be able to recognise and interpret expressions that contain hidden meanings, such as euphemistic (and dysphemistic) ones, some work on automatic detection of euphemism (e.g. Felt and Riloff 2020; Zhu et al. 2021) has been carried out. In this line, Lee, Feldmann and Peng (2022) have developed an ambitious project that aims at building an algorithm to detect potentially new euphemisms, i.e., not previously recorded in dictionaries, without human intervention. A number of pilot experiments conducted so far on the euphemism PET 'potentially euphemistic terms' dataset gathered by Gavidia et al. (2022) seem to prove first, that euphemistic expressions and their non-euphemistic counterparts differ in the strength of the sentiment they convey; second, that euphemism is an essentially context-sensitive phenomenon; and third, that euphemisms are semantically more ambiguous than the taboo expressions they substitute. In the same vein, Devi and Saharia (2023) have recently proposed an identification mechanism to detect domain-specific euphemisms through clustering techniques. Computational approaches to processing euphemism, however promising as they are, have to overcome the obstacle of the dynamic, changing, contextual-dependent nature of euphemism.

4. Methodological aspects

In order to compile the body of research produced on taboo language during the twenty-first century, searches were conducted on internationally acknowledged databases covering journal literature of the arts and humanities and the social sciences such as Arts and Humanities Citation Index, Social Sciences Citation Index and Book Citation Index – Social Sciences & Humanities (Web of Science Core Collection), provided by Clarivate (<https://www.webofscience.com/wos/woscc/basic-search>), and Scopus, provided by Elsevier (<https://www.scopus.com/search/form.uri?display=basic#basic>).⁶ In the search engines of the platforms, some filters were applied: in Web of Science the search was conducted within [Title], [Abstract] and [Keywords] using the terms *euphemism*, *dysphemism* and *taboo*. In Scopus the same terms were searched within [Article title, Abstract, Keywords]. The search period was limited to studies published between 2000 and 2024.

The study presented here covers different types of bibliographical references (journal articles, research monographs, collective volumes, book chapters and encyclopedic entries) that were published, either in print or online, in the period from 2000 to 2024. All publications collected were entered into a database (Crespo-Fernández 2025). With a view to completing a homogeneous body of research, some additional restrictions on the inclusion criteria had to be imposed. First, the only publications included in the database were those that contribute to our understanding of taboo avoidance and taboo breaking as language phenomena. This means that non-linguistic approaches to taboo, i.e. purely sociological, psychological or anthropological studies, and titles that touch on the topic of taboo-related language tangentially were left out. More precisely, for the publications to be included, the terms *euphemism*, *dysphemism* and/or *taboo* (or any of their derivatives) had to appear either in the title, subtitle and/or keywords. In any case, the abstract (or summary, in the case of research monographs and edited volumes) was carefully examined to determine whether the publication is concerned with the linguistic aspects, or X-phemistic values, of taboo words. Second, the search was restricted to the publications, whether data-driven or theoretical, that are written in English on taboo naming in the Anglophone context, including comparative studies between English and other languages and translation studies involving English as a source or target language. Third, in order to make sure that the publications meet the minimum quality standards, only the articles published in journals indexed in Emerging Sources Citation Index, Arts & Humanities Citation Index, Social Sciences Citation Index (Web of Science) or Scimago Journal & Country Rank (Scopus) were included in the database. For research monographs and edited volumes to be considered, the publisher must be indexed in at least one of the following databases: Book Citation Index (Social Sciences & Humanities), Scholarly Publisher Indicator (discipline "Literature,

⁶ As of September 2024, Web of Science core collection covered 22,209 journals, books and conference proceedings with over 92 million total records (<https://clarivate.libguides.com/librarianresources/coverage>). For its part, Scopus, as of December 2023, covered about 29,200 journals and 217,000 book titles with over 94 million records (<https://www.elsevier.com/products/scopus/content>).

Linguistics, Philology”) or Norwegian Register for Scientific Journals, Series and Publishers, often known as the Norwegian Register, within the levels 1 or 2 (publication channels approved as ‘scientific’).

At a later stage, the publications were first arranged by publication format into journal articles, research monographs, collective volumes, including special issues in journals, book chapters and encyclopedic entries. PhD. Dissertations and conference proceedings were excluded, as they are generally not peer reviewed and quality cannot be determined. This categorisation by publication format is important because of the difference in time and effort that works in each format require for their production. Then, the publications included in the database were assigned to different linguistic research disciplines based on their titles, keywords and, if necessary, abstracts or summaries. This organisation is interesting in two senses: first, it provides useful assistance to the reader in thinking about each research discipline in relation to taboo-related language, i.e., how taboo, euphemism and dysphemism are approached from different theoretical and analytical perspectives; and second, it contributes to contextualise and establish connections in the research published on taboo and language in the last twenty-five years. It is important to note that some publications could possibly fit under more than one research discipline. In cases like these, the studies were listed in the category that best identifies the publication in question. Afterwards, the journal articles in which a greater number of taboo-related research studies have been published are obtained simply by counting the number of publications in each journal. Finally, the most highly cited publications are listed. For the citation rank analysis, the number of citations of each publication was obtained from Google Scholar, a freely accessible web search engine that indexes scholarly literature, on 31 December 2024.

5. Findings and discussion

The body of taboo-related research collected for the present study consists of a total of 503 publications in different formats, namely book chapters, edited volumes, encyclopedic entries, journal articles and research monographs. As graphically represented in Figure 2, the category of journal articles stands out in quantitative terms (N=331, which makes up 65.80% of the total number of publications collected) followed, at a distance, by that of book chapters (N=122; 24.25%). Research monographs (N=25; 4.97%), encyclopedic entries (N=15; 2.98%) and edited volumes and special issues (N=10; 1.98%) turn out to have little quantitative relevance.

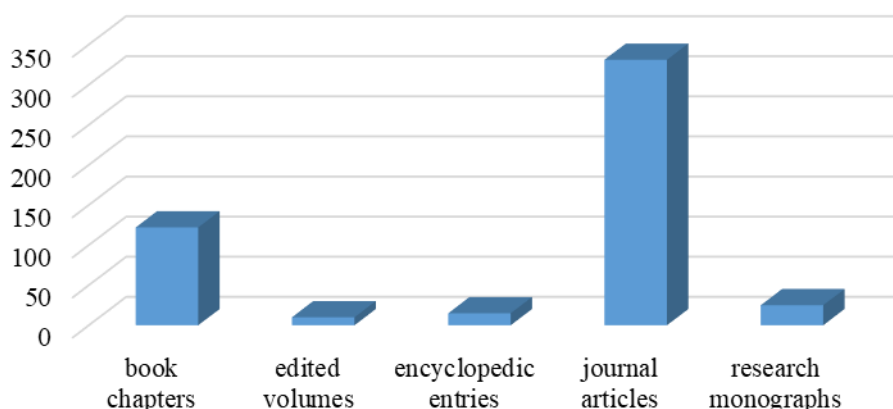


Figure 2: Categorisation of publications by format

The publications included in the database cover a variety of research disciplines (see Crespo-Fernández 2025). The most relevant in terms of the number of publications are cognitive semantics, discourse analysis, pragmatics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics and translation studies, as well as a miscellaneous category including research fields not otherwise specified (see Figure 4). As Figure 3 shows, the number of publications in discourse analysis (N=122; 24.25%) is the most quantitatively relevant in the dataset, followed by sociolinguistics (N=104; 20.67%) and pragmatics (N=97; 19.28%). These three disciplines make up almost two thirds of the total number of publications (N=323; 64.21%). Cognitive semantics (N=37; 7.35%), translation studies (N=34; 6.75%) and psycholinguistics (N=28; 5.56%) are much less statistically significant. The miscellaneous category, including a total of 12 research areas, makes up almost a fifth of the publications collected (N=81; 16.10%).

As Figure 4 represents, the disciplines included in the miscellaneous category are the least quantitatively relevant in the body of research collected for this study. In this category, the following areas of research are included, in quantitative order: gender studies (N=16), lexicology [LE] (N=11), linguistic anthropology [LA] (N=10), language acquisition [LAC] (N=9), historical linguistics [HL] (N=7), ecolinguistics [EL] (N=6), grammar [GR] (N=6), sign language [SL] (N=4), computational linguistics [CL] (N=3), literary studies [LS] (N=3), multimodality [MU] (N=3) and phonetics and phonology [PP] (N=3).

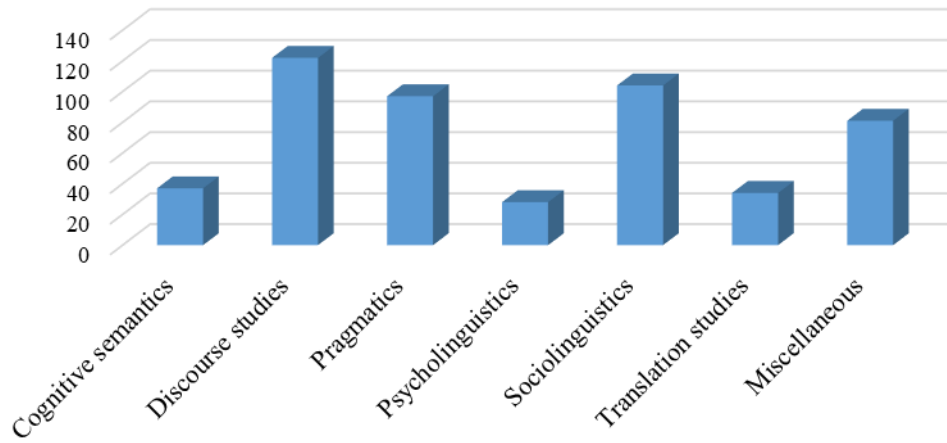


Figure 3: Number of publications by research discipline

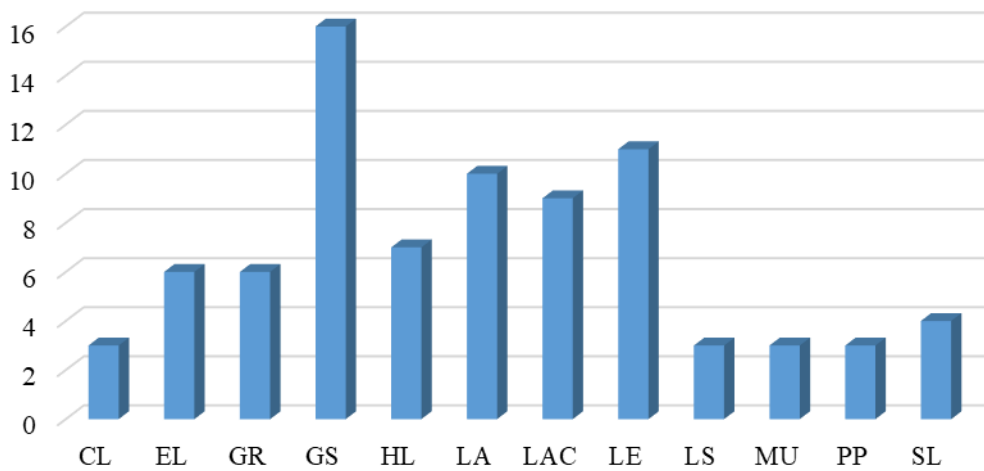


Figure 4: Publications within each research area in the miscellaneous category

Although the dataset this study is based on is limited to publications written in English on taboo naming in the Anglophone context, linguistic taboos in other languages are also represented in a number of translation and comparative studies, as illustrated in Figure 5. The languages involved in the translation of taboos are, in quantative order, Spanish (9 publications), Arabic (6), Portuguese (4), Italian (3), French (1), Persian (1), Swahili (1) and Zimbabwean (1). In addition, research on taboo language extends to comparative studies linking the verbal taboo in the English-speaking context with taboo in other languages, namely Spanish (5 publications), French (3), German (3), Chinese (2), Arabic (1), Malay (1), Norwegian (1) and Russian (1).

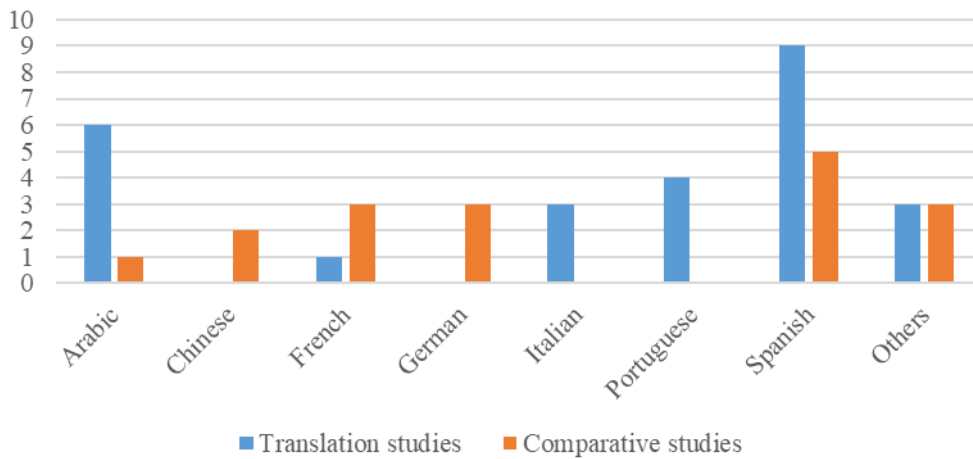


Figure 5: Translation and comparative studies on taboo language

From what has been said so far, it seems evident that research on taboo language in the twenty-first century has contributed to the growing interest in the relationship between language and discourse and has embraced the social, political and cultural implications of taboo naming in a diversity of communicative contexts. It is also worth noting that research on this field also touches on issues such as gender identities or ecological dynamics that have recently garnered public and media attention. We should bear in mind that research on taboo language has also looked at the way taboo manifests in different languages, cultures and societies. Translation and comparative research on taboo-related terms and expressions in different languages allows to gain an insight into the presence of (self-)censorship in different cultures and the degree of acceptability of taboo expressions; we should not forget that although taboo is universal, its verbal manifestations are culturally and socially dependent. Simply put, the studies that have been published on taboo-related language since the turn of the century, some focused on specific taboo subjects, some comprehensive in scope, reflect the global, multidisciplinary and all-embracing nature of taboo-related language in communication.

It is also important to say that the number of publications devoted to dysphemism, mostly focused on swearing (see, for instance, the works by Jay, Dewaele and McEnery), cannot hope to compete with the vast research on euphemism and taboo avoidance. In fact, in the Web of Science database (Arts and Humanities Citation Index, Social Sciences Citation Index and Book Citation Index – Social Sciences & Humanities), studies specifically concerned with euphemism exceed by far those related to dysphemism, which is reflected in the titles, abstracts and keywords of the entries in this database in the period from 2000 to 2004. Significantly enough, the term *euphemism* is found in the titles of a total of 71 entries, in the abstracts of 288 and in the keywords of 77, whereas *dysphemism* only appears in the titles of 9 publications, in the abstracts of 16 and in the keywords of 17.

The diversity of perspectives from which taboo language research can be addressed makes the study of taboo language a good candidate for a range of academic journals. Figure 6 presents a ranking list of journals publishing studies on taboo language since the beginning of the twenty-first century. This list reflects, on the one hand, the wide spectrum of taboo language research in the period from 2000 to 2024 and, on the other hand, the most relevant research areas involved; in fact, it is not by chance that among the top ten journals listed, two of them cover the field of pragmatics (*Journal of Pragmatics*, *Pragmatics & Cognition*) and other three publish in the area of discourse (*Discourse & Society*, *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict*). Of special mention is *Journal of Pragmatics*, by far the most relevant academic journal in taboo language research (18 entries in the dataset) and *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict*, which stands out on the second position (14). It is also worth noting that in this ranking list, the journals range from those that are general in scope to others devoted to specific research disciplines or subjects: among the top ten journals, five are specialised (*Anthropological Quarterly*, *Discourse & Society*, *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict*, *Journal of Pragmatics*, *Pragmatics & Cognition*) and five are multidisciplinary (*Atlantis. A Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies*, *American Speech*, *Language Sciences*, *Lexis. Journal in English Lexicology*, *Lingua*), which shows the broad and interdisciplinary nature of taboo language research.

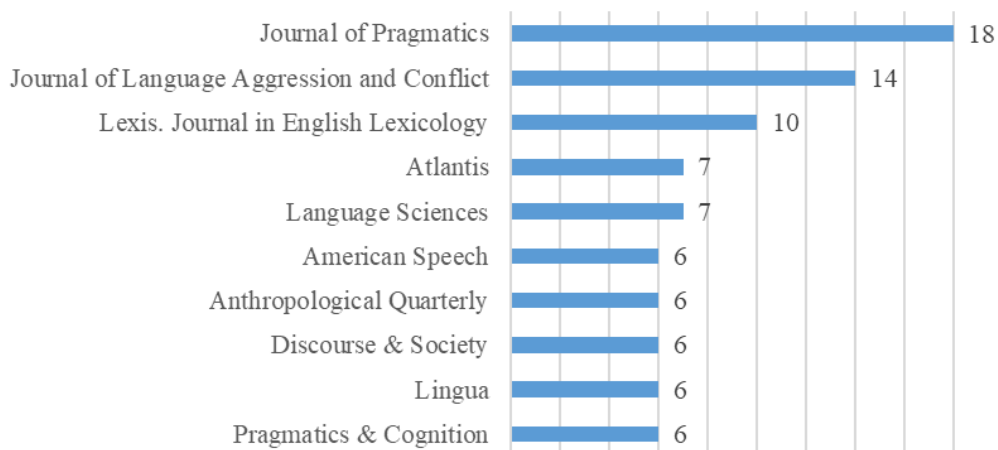


Figure 6: Ranking list of journals publishing studies on taboo language (2000-2024)

Looking at the most highly cited publications on taboo language provides valuable information on the most influential research areas and authors and, by doing so, opens up a useful perspective on the direction that research in the field has taken since the turn of the twenty-first century. Table 1 summarises the ten most cited publications as of December 2024 in the period from 2000 to 2024.

Table 1: Ten most cited publications on taboo-related language (2000-2024)

Title	Author	Year	Format	Citations
<i>Forbidden words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language</i>	Allan, K. and Burrige, K.	2006	Research monograph	2,597
<i>Swearing in English: Bad Language, Purity and Power from 1586 to the Present</i>	McEnery, T.	2004	Research monograph	821
<i>An Encyclopedia of Swearing: The Social History of Oaths, Profanity, Foul Language and Ethnic Slurs in the English-Speaking World</i>	Hughes, M.	2006	Research monograph	626
<i>Swearing: A Cross-Cultural Linguistic Study</i>	Ljung, M.	2011	Research monograph	532
Expletives as solidarity signals in FTAs on the factory floor	Daly, N. et al.	2004	Article	303
Swearing in Modern English: The case of fuck in the BNC	McEnery, A. and Xiao, Z.	2004	Article	247
The language of death. Euphemism and conceptual metaphorization in Victorian obituaries	Crespo-Fernández, E.	2006	Article	236
Euphemism and language change: The sixth and seventh ages	Burrige, K.	2012	Article	228
The pragmatics of connotation	Allan, K.	2007	Article	192
Towards a new approach to the linguistic definition of euphemism	Casas Gómez, M.	2009	Article	190

As shown in Table 1, four out of the ten highest-impact publications are anchored in the field of pragmatics. This is the case of Allan and Burrige's (2006) seminal book *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language* (2,597 citations), by far, the most cited publication, which also touches on sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, and the articles "Expletives as solidarity signals in FTAs on the factory floor" (303), "Euphemism and language change: the sixth and seventh ages" (228) and "The pragmatics of connotation" (192). Other highly cited publications, such as the articles "The language of death. Euphemism and conceptual metaphorization in Victorian obituaries" (236) and "Towards a new approach to the linguistic definition of euphemism" (190) fall under the scope of cognitive semantics. The field of sociolinguistics also features prominently, as the books *Swearing in English* (821), *An Encyclopedia of Swearing: The Social History of Oaths, Profanity, Foul Language and Ethnic Slurs in the English-Speaking World* (626), *Swearing: A Cross-Cultural Linguistic Study* (532) and the article "Swearing in Modern English: The case of fuck in the BNC" (247) rank the second, third, fourth and sixth most cited publications respectively. In this respect, it is worth noting that the literature on dysphemism is overwhelmingly focused on swearing, as reflected in the fact that three out of the four studies exclusively devoted to dysphemistic language in Table 1 (McEnery, Hughes, Ljung, McEnery and Xiao) are concerned with swearing at the socio-historical level.

It is important to say that the three most cited publications saw the light in the early years of the new millennium, which implies that an early publication year may be helpful for collecting citations. However, this is not necessarily and always so, as the most recent publication among the top ten, "Euphemism and language change: the sixth and seventh ages", which dates back to 2012, ranks the eighth most cited study (228), just eight citations below the seventh (236). It is also important to determine whether there is a correlation between open access status and citation counts. The vast majority of the ten most cited publications (eight out of ten, to be precise) are not published open access. Only two articles ("The language of death. Euphemism and conceptual metaphorization in Victorian obituaries" and "Euphemism and language change: the sixth and seventh ages") are freely available online. This means that open access publications in the field of taboo language do not necessarily receive more citations than paywalled ones, although, generally speaking, academic publications without subscription charges or paywalls reach a wider audience compared to traditional paywalled articles, books or book chapters (Dorta González and Dorta González 2023).

6. The present and future of taboo language research

At the moment of writing, research activity in the field of taboo language, although still relatively understudied, especially in some areas, and highly controversial at times, is more than promising. Despite the fact that, sadly enough, *Maledicta, The International Journal of Verbal Aggression*, a journal entirely dedicated to research on abusive and obscene (i.e. dysphemistic) language edited by Reinhold Aman stopped being published in 2005 after almost 30 years its first number came out, a wide range of academic journals, both specialised and multidisciplinary, publish studies on taboo language nowadays, as commented in the previous section. Of special mention is *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict*, which has become a forum for researchers interested in aggressive, abusive and offensive, hence dysphemistic, language and is expected to fill the gap left by *Maledicta* as the leading academic journal in taboo language.

Similarly, more and more conferences and academic meetings held in and out of Europe are dedicated to the study of taboo-related language. Take, for example, the 26th LIPP Symposium "Sex, Death & Politics – Taboos in Language" held in October 2019 in Munich, Germany, and the "9th Symposium on Language and Communication: the Linguistic Taboo", held on April 2023 in Alcalá de Henares, Spain. Of special interest is the Taboo Conference Series (TaCo) originated at the Department of Interpretation and Translation of the University of Bologna, Italy, where the first edition was held in 2012. Since then, and every two years, the TaCo Conference has provided an excellent platform to discuss the multifaceted ramifications of taboo in language.

and communication in a variety of research disciplines such as sociolinguistics, pragmatics, cultural studies, psychology or translation studies, to mention a few. For its fifth and last edition so far, held in Rome in 2022, the Taboo Conference series specifically addressed the subject of taboo in language, culture, literature and communication as produced and perceived in today's multicultural society. In addition, work on taboo, euphemism, dysphemism and matters that concern the concept of taboo in its multiple manifestations can be easily accommodated in well-established linguistics conferences that are held every year all over the world.

In forthcoming years, it is expected that research on taboo language will continue its trend of methodological diversity as a logical response to the varied forms that taboo takes in communication. Research in this field, as promising as it is, has some challenges that should be overcome in the coming years. First, as Miller (2022) notes, some areas of research like taboo language in media translation, in second language instruction and in situations of language contact, may prove to be more attractive to scholars than have been so far. Second, taboo language studies should go beyond verbal and written communication and include other less dominant modes like non-verbal communication (gestures, body language, eye contact, facial expressions) and visual communication (images, symbols). And third, we should bear in mind that highly stigmatised taboos (take, for example, defecation, incest or sadomasochism) are yet to receive the scholarly attention that they deserve, no matter how embarrassing, immoral or disgusting they may be. In fact, the task of linguist is to describe how the language is actually used, without prejudice or value judgement. As Aitchison (2000, 5) once said: "Linguistics is descriptive, not prescriptive. Linguists are interested in what is said, not what they think ought to be said".

7. Concluding remarks

The review of academic literature on taboo language presented here provides evidence of the shape of the field in the twenty-first century. Such an analysis has offered valuable insights into the most relevant research disciplines, main publication formats, most cited publications and relevant journals in the field. The article has therefore the dual function of discipline boundary demarcation and research summation from a broad and all-embracing perspective.

This paper has shown that discourse analysis, sociolinguistics and linguistic pragmatics rank the main research disciplines in the field of taboo-related language, followed, at a distance, by cognitive semantics, psycholinguistics, translation studies, gender studies and linguistic anthropology, among others. Accordingly, the academic journals publishing work on taboo are both multidisciplinary and subject specific and cover a wide spectrum of areas. Such a diversity of research contributes to shaping a multi-faceted approach to the phenomenon of taboo in language.

The present study has some limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the compilation of taboo-related research offered here can make no claim to completeness, as certain restrictions were imposed on the dataset regarding the selection of titles. In fact, some interesting journal articles that have not been published in Web of Science or Scopus were left out. Second, the choice to limit the analysis to the publications written in English about taboo naming in English-speaking contexts might be interpreted as a means to convey that publications in other languages are not worthy of consideration, which, very obviously, is not the case. Because of this, future analyses may be conducted on larger datasets, not limited to titles written in English, which would create the premises for engaging in contrastive analyses on research activity in the field of taboo language in different languages, cultures and societies. Third, as Jay (2020) noticed, defining the category of taboo words is sometimes problematic, which may lead to confusion in the selection process of publications included in the dataset. And the fourth limitation derives from the difficulty of assigning certain multidisciplinary works to one of the established research disciplines, as the dividing line between them is, on occasions, rather blurred. In any case, despite these limitations, the present study offers the reader a highly comprehensive and updated picture of research activity in the field of taboo language over the last twenty-five years in the Anglophone academic context.

In summary, the overlapping between the different dimensions that play a role in the linguistic expression of taboo, the wide range of journals that publish studies on taboo language and the diversity of linguistic disciplines involved are likely to guarantee further research on the fascinating field of taboo in language in the future.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in the Zenodo repository at: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14639969>.

Competing interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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