



## **Navigating the Connection of Euphemisms and Taboo Words: Language, Culture, and Societal Reflections**

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**Abstract:** This article examines the intricate relationship between euphemisms and taboo words, exploring how cultural, historical, and societal factors shape their use and evolution. Euphemisms soften expressions for socially or morally sensitive topics, while taboo words often carry cultural and emotional weight, reflecting fears, social norms, and historical attitudes. Through examples from language history, including Victorian prudishness and American linguistic shifts, the article delves into how euphemisms adapt to societal needs, occasionally becoming taboo themselves. Additionally, the piece discusses swearing, terms of abuse, and their cultural implications, highlighting the dynamic nature of language and the role of euphemisms in societal discourse.

**Keywords:** euphemisms; taboo words; swearing; forbidden words; terms of abuse; profanity.

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## 1. Introduction

Language is a powerful mirror of society, reflecting cultural norms, taboos, and values. Euphemisms, derived from the Greek word *euphemismos* meaning *to speak well*, are linguistic tools that substitute gentler or socially acceptable terms for harsh or taboo expressions. Conversely, taboo words, originating from Polynesian culture, signify expressions that are forbidden or disapproved on moral, religious, or societal grounds. Together, these linguistic phenomena encapsulate humanity's evolving relationship with sensitive subjects.

This article explores the development of euphemisms and taboo words, focusing on their historical significance and the societal contexts that shape their usage. From Victorian-era prudery to modern American openness, language serves as a lens to examine shifts in cultural attitudes toward topics like sex, religion, and social hierarchies. The discussion extends to swearing, which incorporates both euphemistic and taboo elements, and terms of abuse, revealing how language simultaneously divides and connects communities.

## 2. Euphemisms and Taboo Words

Taboo words and euphemisms are usually treated by lexicologists in close connection, as neither could exist without the other.

The word taboo is of Polynesian origin, and it denotes words either forbidden to profane use or banned or disapproved on grounds of morality or taste. The taboo fields of a vocabulary reflect the taboo fields of human life in a given society at a specific time. Different peoples may have different taboo fields, but generally speaking, there are some areas on which most peoples impose the same ban: religion, swearing, parts and functions of the body, dress, eating, physical disability, illness and death, some professional activities, and social status.

This enumeration of the major fields is significant of the attitude towards words and the expressive load of taboo words. The reasons for rejection may vary: fear (especially connected with religious terms), regard for one's feelings (especially in relation to an unpleasant or painful reality), and decency (in the case of vulgar terms).

Euphemisms for *damn* are *blame*, *blast*, *bother*, *dang*, *darn*, *durn*. However, very often, *damn* and *hell*, like some other taboo words, are used simply as intensifiers to express annoyance, disgust or surprise. Annoyance and disgust are the main feelings, expressed by Professor Higgins's well-known rejoinder:

"Damn Mrs. Pearce; and damn the coffee; and damn you; and damn my own folly"

Shaw's professor made use of many such taboo words and sometimes euphemisms. The use of such terms is an important device in the dramatist's toolkit to suggest the temperament of his character, e. g.,

"What the devil of a name!" (Show, 2005:71)

### 3. Forbidden Words

The American people, once the most prudish on earth, adopted a certain defiant looseness of speech during World War I and Prohibition. Today, words and phrases are encountered everywhere - on the air, on the screen, in theatres, in comic papers, in newspapers, on the floor of Congress, and even at the domestic hearth - that were reserved for use in saloons a generation ago.

Victoria was not crowned until 1838, but a Victorian antipathy to naughty words had flourished in this country since the Seventeenth Century. The rage of euphemism which arose during Puritan times was quickly transferred to the American colonies.

Mrs. Frances Trollope recorded that, to the more delicate Americans of that day, Shakespeare was obscene and unendurable, and that very mention of Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* made them shrink in horror. It is one of the ironies of literary history that Pope himself, in his edition of Shakespeare, brought out in 1725, heavily bowdlerized the Bard. In the masquerade scene of *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, he changed the word *toes* in the lines:

*Gentlemen, welcome! Ladies that have their toes*

*Unplagued with corns will have a bout with you.*

to *feet*, though letting *corns* stand. A century later, in the United States, *feet* was also under the ban. (Trollop, 1832:67)

When Captain Frederick Marryat, the author of *Mr. Midshipman Easy*, came to the United States in 1837, he got into trouble at Niagara Falls when a young woman acquaintance slipped and barked at her skin. As she limped home, he asked, "Did you hurt your leg much?" She turned from him "evidently much shocked or offended," but presently recovered her composure and told him gently that the word *leg* was never mentioned before ladies; the proper word was *limb*. Even chickens ceased to have legs.

The palmy days of euphemism ran from the 1820s to the 1880s. *Bulls* became *male cows*, *cows* became *creatures* (more commonly *cow critters*), seed oxen and Jonathans, both a *chair* and the *backside* became *seats*, *harlots* became *fallen women*, *cockroaches* became *roaches*, *trousers* became *inexpressibles*, *unmentionables*, *unwhisperables*, *stockings* (female) became *hose*, *shirt* was forbidden, *to go to bed* became *to retire*, servant girls ceased *to be seduced* and began *to be betrayed*, and *stomach*, then under the ban in England, was transformed

into a euphemism for the whole region from the nipples to the pelvic arch. The biblical *ass* was displaced by *jackass*, *jack* or *donkey*, and *to castrate* became *to change*, *to arrange* or *to alter*, even on the farm. The very word *woman* became a term of reproach, and the uncouth *female* took its place. There were female seminaries, boarding schools, institutes, orphan asylums, and missionary societies in the 1820-70 era. (Freyer, 1963:45)

In 1833 Noah Webster actually undertook to *bowdlerize* the Bible. His version substituted *breast* for *teat*, *smell* for *stink*, *to nurse* or *to nourish* for *to give suck*, *lewdness* for *fornication*, *lewd woman* or *prostitute* for *whore*, *to go astray* for *to go a whoring* and *impurities*, *idolatries* and *carnal connection* for *whoredom* (Webster, 1833:89).

This mania for the chaste afflicted even the terminology of the arts and sciences. For example, the name of the device in which the percussion cap of a muzzle-loading gun was fixed and exploded was changed from nipple to cone or *tube*.

After the Civil War, there was a recurrence of delicacy, and many euphemisms that still adorn the American newspapers came into use, e. g., interesting (or delicate) *condition*, *disorderly house*, *felonious attack*, *serious charge* and *criminal assault*.

The passage of the Comstock Postal Act, in 1873, greatly stimulated the search for euphemism. Once that amazing law was upon the statute book and Comstock himself was given the inquisitorial powers of a post-office inspector, it became positively dangerous to print certain ancient and essentially decent English words. To this day the effects of that reign of terror are still visible. We still use *toilet*, *retiring room*, *washroom* and *public comfort station* in place of franker terms. The list of such euphemisms is long, especially for *women's room*. In the high days of euphemy in the United States they were not called anything at all, but simply marked *For Ladies Only*. Later this was reduced to *Ladies Only*, then to *Ladies*, and finally to *Women*. Simultaneously, *For Gents Only* went through the stages of *Gents Only*, *Gents*, *Gentlemen* and *Men*. (United States Code, 2013:518)

Hollywood, always under heavy pressure from official and volunteer censors, has its own Index, which is updated occasionally. This Index includes, as permanent fixtures, *broad* (for *woman*), *chippy*, *cocotte*, *courtesan*, *eunuch*, *fairy* (in the sense of *homosexual*), *floozy*, *harlot*, *hot mamma*, *hussy*, *madam* (in the sense of *brothel keeper*), *nance*, *pansy*, *slut*, *trollop*, *tart* and *wench* and, of course, *whore*. The word *Sex* is also forbidden, as is the adjective *sexual*. The term *Jew* may be used only in complimentary connotations, and *kike*, *yid*, *dago* and *nigger* are prohibited altogether. *God* must be used circumspectly and *Gawd* is under the ban. Similarly, *Lord* ("when used profanely"), *Christ*, *guts*, *hell*, *hellcat*, *Jesus*, *Geez*,

*son of a...*, *S. O. B.*, *louse* and *punk* are also prohibited. Travelling *salesman* may not be used “where reference is made to a farmer’s daughter,” and *liar* is reserved for scenes “in a light comedy vein.” Even the word *virtuous* is taboo and back in 1916 even *virgin* was a forbidden word, at least in Philadelphia.

There were times when people objected to its use of such perfectly harmless words such as *backside*, *behind* and *bawdy house*. It is no wonder that American newspapers, with few exceptions, continue to use the euphemisms inherited from the Victorian age, e.g., *criminal operation*, *house of ill repute*, *statutory offense*, *intimate relations* and *felonious assault*. Sometimes the result is extremely amusing. For example, we may report that a fiend had knocked a girl down, “dragged her down the cellar steps, beat her with an iron pipe, and then assaulted her.”

The progress of frankness since the Golden Age of euphemism in America is illustrated by the fact that 72.3% of the men and 54.6% of the women reported that they saw no impropriety in *garter*, that 88.6% of the men and 72.8% of the women used *sex*, that 95.2% and 92.4% respectively used *leg* and that 97% and 93.3% used *sick*. The word most abhorred by men was *puke* and by women *bitch*. Only 47.4% of respondents reported using the term *vomit*.

The number of euphemisms for forbidden words still in use in the United States remains significant. Only a few groups of terms have been systematically investigated across wide areas, such as for the *Linguistic Atlas*. Various correspondents report that *single child* is used by African Americans in Baltimore to indicate a bastard; that *bastrich* is used in the Duluth area as a humorous combination of *bastard* and *son of a bitch*; that the older rural Virginians use *Durham* for *bull*; that in Georgia *to castrate* is *to make a Baptist minister of him* that in southern Illinois *to be pregnant* is expressed as *to walk uphill* and that *she* is often used as a derogatory prefix in many parts of the country, perceived as more or less indecent. Euphemisms also exist on more formal levels, e.g., *intestinal fortitude* for *guts*, *to burp* for *to belch*, *derrière* for the *female backside*, *to make*, *to lay*, and so on.

Over time, euphemisms may become too closely associated with their intended meaning, and in turn, become taboo. For instance, the word *whore*, which is cognate with the Latin *carus* (*dear*), must at one point have been a polite substitute for some word now lost.

#### 4. Swearing

Some cultures do not swear at all. The Japanese, Malaysians, and most Polynesians and American Indians lack native swear words. The Finns, lacking the kind of words needed to express frustration such as when stubbing a while

answering a wrong number at 2.00 a. m., rather oddly adopted the word *ravintolassa*. It means *in the restaurant*.

However, most cultures do swear and have been doing so for a very long time. According to Dr Adams's findings, certain things have remained unchanged for over 1,500 years, most notably a fascination with the size of the male member, for which the Romans provided many names, including *tool*, *dagger*, *sickle*, *tiller*, *stake*, *sword*, and (a little oddly perhaps) *worm*.

Swearing seems to have some near-universal qualities. In almost all cultures, it involves one or more of the following: *filth*, *the forbidden* (particularly *incest*), and *the sacred*, and often all three. Most cultures have two levels of swearing: relatively mild and highly profane. Many insults are generally regarded as harmless teasing - *big head*, *long nose*, *skinny arms* - and a whole body of much more serious insults, which are uttered only in circumstances of high emotion. (Adams, 2006:34)

The emotional charge attached to words can change dramatically over time. *Piss* dates back at least to the 13th century and may be even older. It has been traced to the Vulgar Latin *pissare* and thus could conceivably date from the Roman occupation of Britain. (Hughes, 1991:65) As *piss* became considered indecent, the euphemism *pee* emerged, based simply on the pronunciation of the first letter of the word. *Cunt* was once relatively harmless. Chaucer used it casually and severally in *The Canterbury Tales*, spelling it in various forms such as *queynte*, *queinte*, and even *Kent*. The City of London once had an alley frequented by prostitutes called *Gropecuntlane*. There is also a poem (and likely many others) dedicated to the woman's sexual organ:

*The portions of a woman that appeal to man's depravity  
Are constructed with considerable care,  
And what at first appears to be a simple little cavity  
Is in fact a most elaborate affair.  
Physicians of distinction have examined these phenomena  
In numerous experimental dames;  
They have tabulated carefully the feminine abdomina,  
And given them some fascinating names.  
And lots of other little things you'd like, if you could see 'em,  
So isn't it a pity, when we common people chatter  
Of these mysteries to which I have referred,  
That we use for such a delicate and complicated matter  
Such a very short and ordinary word.*

—Anonymous, cited by Peter Freyer, "It" in Mrs. Grundy, 1963

It was not until the early 18th century that the word *cunt* became considered indecent. Words that seem entirely harmless now were once capable of provoking considerable passion. In 16th century England, *zooterkins* was a pretty lively word; while in 19th century England *puppy* and *cad* were highly risqué. Until the 1870s, however, it was far more offensive to be profane. *God damn*, *Jesus*, and even *Hell* were regarded as indecent. Swearing by saints was also common. A relic of this practice is the epithet *by George*, which is a contraction of *by St George* and has been around for centuries. *Cock* was for a long time not only a slang for *penis* but also a euphemism for *God*. This tendency to transform profanities into harmless expressions is a particular characteristic of English swearing. While most languages employ euphemisms to some extent, none approaches English for the number of delicate expletives it contains. The gravity of swear words in any language has little to do with the words themselves and much more to do with the fact that they are forbidden. It is a self-reinforcing cycle: forbidden words are emotive because they are forbidden and they are forbidden because they are emotive.

A remarkable example of this is the word *bloody* in England, which to most Britons is as objectionable as *shit* and yet carries no inherent meaning. Some explanations have been suggested, generally involving either a contraction of an oath, such as *by Christ's blood* or *by our Lady*, or that it has some connection with menstruation. There is no historical evidence to support one view over the other. What is clear is that, sometime around the 16th century, people began to say *bloody* and to mean a curse by it. Today, it is often difficult to determine whether it is intended as a curse or in its literal sense, as in the statement, 'The bloody dog is dead.'

A few swear words have evolved different connotations in Britain and America. In America, someone who is *pissed* is *angry*; in Britain, they are *drunk*. *Bugger*, a completely innocent word in America, is far from welcome in polite conversation in Britain. Until 1934, could be fined or imprisoned for writing or saying it. In British usage, a *bugger* is a *sodomite*. Although *bugger* is unacceptable, *buggery* is quite all right: it is the term used by both the legal profession and newspapers when someone is accused of criminal sodomy.

## 5. Terms of abuse

The converse of euphemisms is terms of opprobrium, of which the American language boasts a large stock, chiefly directed at aliens. "Frog" for a *Frenchman* was borrowed by Americans in World War I, and subsequently gained wide circulation at home, but it had been known before. In the 17th century, it was used to designate a Dutchman and also a Jesuit. The term seems to have its origin more likely in the eating habit of frogs by the French. *Frog* is not applied in Canada

to a French Canadian, who is a *Canuck* or simply *Joe*, and prefers to be called a *Habitant*. In the California gold rush the few Frenchmen who turned up were called *parleyvoos* (*parlez vous*) or *keskydees* (*Qu'est-ce qu'il dit?*) by the 49ers. The simple word *French*, to English and to Americans, connotes sexual perversion. The Germans, Spanish and Italians also have forms of *French leave*. Rather curiously, the French and the Germans have few opprobrious phrases for one another. In Prussia *lice* are called *Franzosen*, but in other parts of Germany they are commonly called *Schwaben* (*Swabians*) –and *cockroaches* are *Preussen* (*Prussian*). The French call a *louse* an *espagnol* (*Spanish*) and a *flea* an *espagnole*: the gender difference is unexplained.

The Oxford English Dictionary shows that in 1608 a *Dutch widow* meant a *prostitute*, and that in 1678 a *Dutch bargain* meant *one made in drink*. Not a few of the more familiar terms in Dutch originated in America from hostility between the English and Dutch in early New York, or between the Germans and the other stocks in Pennsylvania and elsewhere. *Dutch courage*, meaning a false courage produced by alcohol, is probably an Americanism, like *Dutch route*, meaning *suicide*, *Dutch feast*, at which the host gets drunk before his guests, *Dutch treat*, one requiring to pay for himself, *Dutch comfort*, the kind that does not comfort.

*Hunk* and *hunkie* (or *hunky* or *hunkey*) are properly applicable to Hungarians only, but they have been extended to include all Europeans coming from the region east of the German lands and west of Russia, save only the Greeks. In regions where Czech immigrants are numerous, *cheskey* is frequently heard.

Irish has been an element in many English compounds, chiefly of a derogatory or satirical significance. *Irish evidence*, *perjury*, *Irish apricots*, *potatoes*, and *Irish legs*, thick ones, were listed by Grose in the first edition of his *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (1785), and *Irish beauty*, a woman with two black eyes, was added in his third edition of 1796. (Grose, 2015:102)

In the Colorado sugar-beet fields the Mexican laborers are spoken of by the euphemism *Spaniards*; they are also called *prismos*. In New Mexico, they are often called *natives*. In the same state Americans are *Anglos* and *Indians* are *pueblos*. In New York, *Jewish boy*, *girl*, etc. is often used as a sort of euphemism. There is apparently no objection to *Jews* in the plural to designate the whole body of Israel, but in the singular, it is avoided, and *Hebrew* is used instead.

The *Negroes* everywhere carry on a double campaign—first against the use of *nigger*, and secondly, for the capitalization of *Negro*. A curious euphemism for *Negro*, apparently originated in the South, is, nonpromotable, signifying a locomotive fireman who is ineligible for advancement to engineer because of his color. It has come to signify any Negro in a like unfortunate position.

In 1937 Dr. Miller contributed a thoughtful article, under the title *Negroes or Colored People?* to Opportunity, the organ of the National Urban League, and it said:

“A printed list consisting of Englishmen, Germans, Italians, Jews, and negroes would be a case of unexplained typographical discrimination. If it be said that Negro is not derived from a country or geographical division, as other racial divisions are, an adequate rejoinder would be that neither is Jew.” (Miller, 1937:143)

The race conflict in the United States will never be abated until the overwhelming majority of whites are induced to look at Negroes with more tolerance, and with less than their present uneasiness.

## 6. Conclusion

Euphemisms and taboo words exemplify the adaptability and responsiveness of language to societal values and changes. Euphemisms offer a way to address sensitive or uncomfortable topics with delicacy, while taboo words often carry deep emotional and cultural significance. As society evolves, so does its lexicon, with euphemisms occasionally transitioning into taboos and vice versa.

The exploration of swearing and terms of abuse further underscores the dynamic nature of language. Swearing often incorporates both euphemisms and taboos, and terms of abuse reveal societal prejudices and hierarchies. Together, these linguistic tools reflect not only the constraints of cultural norms but also humanity's creativity in navigating them.

Understanding the interplay between euphemisms and taboo words allows for deeper insights into societal development, historical attitudes, and cultural identities. By analyzing these linguistic phenomena, we gain a better appreciation of language as a living, evolving system that adapts to the needs and values of its speakers.

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