

Use and Perception of Linguistic Taboos in the Mizo Society

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Abstract

This paper investigates the various categories of linguistic taboos existing in Mizo Society and their euphemistic usage. It examines the attitudes of Mizo speakers and the socio-cultural factors contributing to taboos and euphemism. This paper shows how the different linguistic taboos are strategically replaced with more acceptable terms with processes such as employing euphemistic substitution and creation of antonyms. It also argues that this substitution is conditioned by the socio-cultural norms of the Mizo society. Two main research instruments used in the collection of data for this study are questionnaires and interviews.

Keywords: Mizo, Euphemism, Linguistic taboo.

Introduction

Language serves as one of the fundamental elements that constitutes a human society. The way a language is used by an individual is considered to reflect the society in which the individual belongs. There are certain linguistic norms that conditions the way an individual uses words to express suitably based on different circumstances. A breach in the accepted linguistic norm is considered as a linguistic taboo.

Languages may contain certain lexical items or words that are considered unacceptable by the speakers of the language, such words are taboo and are usually avoided by the speakers of the language. Linguistic taboo can be seen in every society and culture and used by individuals in a society at some point. This study on the linguistic taboos of Mizo is to analyze the socio-cultural factors contributing to the taboo words, to study the various categories of linguistic taboos and the attitude of the Mizo people.

Sociolinguistic Setting

Mizo is a language spoken in Mizoram, a state in the North Eastern region of India and belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family. Earlier, each tribe in Mizoram had their own specific dialect which differs from one another due to regional differences. Darchuailova Renthlei (2013) mentioned in his article 'Aspects of Mizo Language' that the lingua franca of Mizoram is considered to be the Lusei dialect although how or when it has been adopted or accepted as the common dialect is indeterminable. It has been assumed to have originated during the Sailo kings rule whose dialect has been adopted by the general population and used up to this day. The language had no script till the end of 19th Century till the advent of the Welsh missionaries who studied the language and developed a script. The script was Roman and developed based on the common dialect of the general population i.e., Lusei which was then used in the translation of the

Bible and in educational institute solidifying its status as lingua franca of Mizoram. Lusei has also been interchangeably used with Duhlian. However, the general term adopted for the lingua franca of Mizoram is popularly said to be Mizo Tawng (Mizo language).

Theoretical Model

Various models of linguistic taboos endeavor to categorize linguistic taboos in association with socio cultural norms of a community. Recent studies also investigate the attitudes of individual in a society towards taboo words and the substitution processes.

Jay (1996) categorizes linguistic taboos into eight types. i) taboo or obscene language ii) blasphemy iii) profanity iv) insults and radical slurs v) expletives (emotional words speaker used to release frustration not directed at anyone) vi) vulgarism (crude and rude expression to devalue things or an individual) vii) cursing and viii) slang.

Qanbar (2011) in her study of Linguistic taboos of Yemeni society classifies it broadly into two parts: Context specific and general taboo words which are then sub categorized. The context specific words are neutral non-taboo words which gets tabooed is specific context and also words relating to physical or social deformity. On the other hand, general includes the unmentionables which are euphemized, and mentionable which words contain minimizers which help in veiling or coating the harshness of the derogatory or tabooed words.

Ghounane (2013) in her research on the Algerian society investigates the various categories of taboo words relating to sexual organ, woman's chest, woman's behind, illegitimate child, adultery, names of unmarried women, names of old men and women, pregnancy, death and sudden deaths. Ghounane studies the various psychological and cultural pressures that results in substitution of certain words with more acceptable terms. Her study also investigates the attitudes of the individuals in the community towards taboo words.

Methodology

Two main methods used for this study are: questionnaires and oral interviews. Firstly, sets of questionnaires were constructed and put forward to 30 participants between the age of 18 yrs. to 50 yrs. The questionnaire consists of eleven sets of questions comprising of nine close ended questions and two semi-closed ended questions. The participants were briefed beforehand on the concept of taboo words and euphemisms with examples provided where necessary. The questionnaires were handed out to the participants utilizing the Random Sampling method.

Additionally, oral interviews were held in a closeted environment where group of people were gathered for a more open and comfortable discussion. The data collected are given in tabular forms with detailed description of analysis.

Types of Linguistic Taboos in Mizo Society

The investigation reveals that Mizo taboos can be categorized into two: 1) with euphemism and 2) without euphemism. These are then sub- categorized.

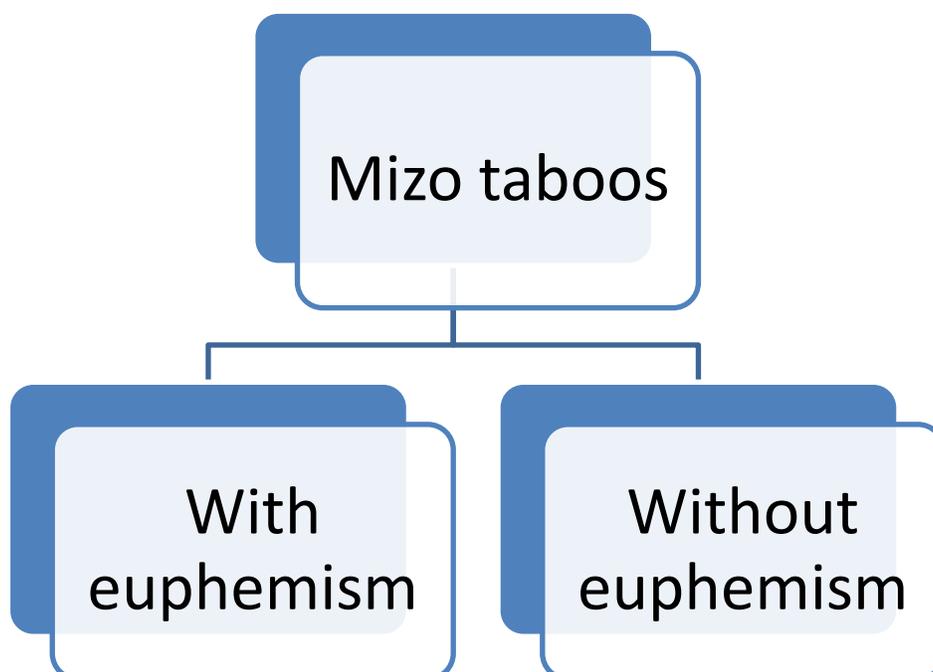


Figure 1: Categorization of Mizo taboos.

The following table consists of the sub-categorization of the two different types of taboos of Mizo, their literal translation, euphemism and gloss.

Table 1: Sub-Categorization of Linguistic taboos in Mizo

Taboo words	Literal translation	Euphemism	Literal translation	Gloss
WITH EUPHEMISM				
Sex				
In lu In ti	To penetrate Sexual intercourse copulate	Mu dun Mipat-hmeichhiat Chesual In Pawl	Sleep together Being male and female Accident To mate	Sexual intercourse
Sexual Organs				
Zang Tilte	Penis	Sazu Kap (both) Thil (both) Zahmawh (both)	Mouse Between legs Something Private parts	Penis
Chhu Kakuk	Vagina	Serh		Vagina
Homosexuality				

Mawngkawhur	Perverted asshole	Tuai Pherh Nu	Feminine male Drag Feminine	Gay
Patil	Masculine penis	Pa Anpui ngaizawng	Masculine or tomboy Liking someone of same gender	Lesbian
Affairs				
Uire	Adulteress	Rinawmlo	Not faithful	Adultery
Ma	Man bringing home another woman while still married and kicking out the wife	Nupui then	To separate from wife	To divorce (by force)
Menstruation				
Thi nei	To have blood	V	No literal translation available. (indicates the shape of private part to discreetly describe menstruation)	To menstruate, to have period
Excretion				
E	to defecate	Inthiar Daikal	To relief oneself To go to the outskirt	Feces
Death				
Thihna	death	Boral Chatuan ram pan Chawl Muhil hlen Fam	To disappear forever Gone to heaven Rest Sleeping forever To go away	death
Disability				
Piangsual (this includes all forms of disabilities)	Born wrong	Rualbanlo Mi anglo	Falling behind other people Unlike others	Disabled

Mit del	Blind eye			
Ke bai	Limping leg			
WITHOUT EUPHEMISM				
Insults and radical slurs				
Mawl	Dumb			Idiot, stupid
Chhaw	Half-witted			-
Chhawih	Mentally deficient, brainless			-
Buh	Slow, dim			-
Zawnga	Monkey			Akin to asshole
Uicho	Mad or stray dog			Akin to bastard (or other bad swear words)
Hang	Dark complexioned			Dark skin
Dum	Black			Dark skin
A	Mad, crazy			Mentally incompetent
Hmelchhia	Bad face			Ugly
Expletives				
Zawng ho	Group of monkeys			Bunch of idiots/jerks/buffoons
Hmel ho	Group of faces			(almost same with previous but this is not as bad)
Awilalpa!	Oh God			Oh! My God!

Analysis and Discussion of Data

The Questionnaire

As aforementioned, Random sampling method was used to administer the questionnaire, so the speakers were not chosen beforehand. Firstly, the questionnaire aims its focus on identifying whether taboo words were limited to a certain age group, gender and social background. The use of euphemisms by the participants was then investigated. Each participant was encouraged to suggest their own euphemised words for taboos. In addition to these, the questionnaires designed were to determine the attitudes of the participants towards taboo language

Results of Analyzed Data

1. Do you use taboo language?

Table 2: Use of taboo language

CHOICE	FEMALE	MALE	TOTAL
YES	14	16	30
NO	0	0	0
TOTAL	14	16	30

The result in the above table shows that 100% of the sample population use taboo words regardless of age, gender and social background.

2. How often do you use it?

Table 3: Frequency of taboo usage

CHOICE	FEMALE	MALE	TOTAL
Many times a day	0	0	0
Once a day	0	0	0
Sometimes	10	8	18
Rarely	4	8	12

60% of the participants claimed that they use taboo words sometimes, 40% who claimed to use it rarely, while there were none who claimed to the regular use of taboo words.

3. Which of the following can lead to the use of taboo language?

Table 4: Reason for using taboo language

CHOICE	FEMALE	MALE	TOTAL
Anger	2	4	6
Insult	4	6	10
On an impulse	6	4	10
Intentionally	2	2	4

The above result shows that the reason for use of taboo language does not differ much between male and female. On an average, females majorly chose 'on an impulse' as their main reason, while the male chooses to use taboo words for hurling insults. 13.33% admitted to the intentional use of taboo words, while 20% admitted to using it while in anger.

4. According to your point of view, which of the following is the most offensive?

Table 5: Most offensive taboo

CHOICE	FEMALE	MALE	TOTAL
Sex	8	8	16
Excretion	0	0	0

Death	0	6	6
Disability	6	2	8
Menstruation	0	0	0
Obscene language	0	0	0

From the above table we can see that 53.33% of the participants believed that sex related words are the most offensive while 20% believed it to be words related to death. 26.66% believed that words relate to disability to be the most offensive.

5. In which environment do you prefer discussing taboo related to sex?

Table 6: Environment for discussing sex.

CHOICE	FEMALE	MALE	TOTAL
Intimate friends	14	16	30
Family	0	0	0
Work colleagues	0	0	0
Public	0	0	0

100% of the sample population states that the discussion or use of taboo words is only preferred within the confidence of intimate friends

6. Do you agree that women use taboo language?

Table 7: Use of taboo language by women

CHOICE	FEMALE	MALE	TOTAL
Agree	6	10	16
Strongly Agree	8	6	14
Disagree	0	0	0
Strongly Disagree	0	0	0

Women in Mizo society are expected to conform to certain norms and are viewed or assumed to be gentler and less aggressive than the men. This test was to see if such social confinement restricts the women from using taboo words. 53.33% of the participants argues that the social restriction whatsoever has no hold on the use of taboo by women and agrees that women do use taboo words. 46.66% of the sample population strongly agreed to it. While there were none neither disagreed nor strongly disagreed.

7. Do you agree that men use taboo words more than women?

Table 8: Men use taboo words more than women

CHOICE	FEMALE	MALE	TOTAL
Agree	10	8	18

Strongly Agree	4	2	6
Disagree	0	6	6
Strongly Disagree	0	0	0

Mizo society being a patriarchal society, there are much lesser social restrictions curbing the men leading to the assumption that men uses taboo words more than women. 60% of the participants agreed that men do use taboo words more than women while 20% strongly agreed to it. 20% of the participants who disagreed to it were all male.

8. Do you use euphemism?

Table 9: Use of euphemism

CHOICE	FEMALE	MALE	TOTAL
Yes	14	16	30
No	0	0	0

100% of the participants agreed that they are more comfortable employing euphemism instead of saying the taboo words and admitted to using it.

9. How often do you use it?

Table 10: Frequency of use of euphemism

CHOICE	FEMALE	MALE	TOTAL
Sometimes	6	10	16
Often	8	6	14
Rarely	0	0	0

53.33% of the participants agreed that they use it sometimes while 46.66% agree to using it often.

10. How do you refer or say death?

The most frequent euphemised word that came up was '*Boral*'.

11. Do you use euphemism to describe the following taboos?

SEX- ***Mu dun***, *Mipathmeichhياتna*

SEXUAL ORGANS- *Serh*, ***Thil***, *Sazu*

HOMOSEXUALITY- *Pherh*, ***Tuai***, *Mawngkawhur*

AFFAIRS- *Uire*, *Kawp*, ***Rinawmlo***

MENSTRUATION- *V*, ***Period***

EXCRETION- ***Inthiar***, *Daikal*

The words in bold are the most common euphemisms mentioned by the participants.

The Interview

According to the interviews conducted, it was observed that the interviewees all had negative attitude towards tabooed words but nevertheless admitted to using it. The interviewees gave various socio-economic reasons contributing to the use of taboo language. The social upbringing of a child can have deep rooted psychological influence on the child which may lead the child to unflinchingly use taboo words or to hesitate before using it. The social environment of a person like friends or peers and colleagues in workplace can influence the individual in the use of taboo language. Psychological factors like anger, annoyance and frustration were also mentioned as one of the contributing factor. Among the interviewees even though there was positive responses among the younger generations, there was an unresponsive reaction from the older age group i.e. late thirties and above, as they were sceptical about admitting to the use of taboo language.

The interview was also conducted to investigate the attitude and views towards the euphemised words. The interviewees mentioned that even within the euphemised words there are certain words that they are more comfortable with, in using, than others. Hence, the euphemised words were then divided in accordance with their level of sensitiveness. Some were considered highly sensitive, some mild and some low, based on the level of comfort in use by participants. The interviewees refrain, if possible, from using highly sensitive euphemised words while favouring the use of euphemism which is mild or low in sensitiveness.

Table 11: Level of Sensitivity of Euphemised Words.

SENSITIVITY			
	HIGH	MID	LOW
SEX	Inpawl	Mipat Hmeichhiatna	Mu dun
			Chesual
SEXUAL ORGANS	Serh	Sazu	Kap
		Zahmawh	Thil
HOMOSEXUALITY	Tuai	Nu	Anpui ngaizawng
	Pherh		
EXTRA MARITAL AFFAIRS			Rinawmlo
			Nupui then
MENSTRUATION	V		
EXCRETION		Daikal	Inthiar
DEATH		Boral	Chatuan ram pan
		Muhil hlen	Fam
			Chawl
DISABILITY	Rualbanlo		
	Mi anglo		

Conclusion

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From analyzing the results of the questionnaires, it has been concluded that amongst the Mizo, the uses of taboo words are not restricted to particular gender or certain age group. Women, it has been observed, use taboo despite the presupposed assumption that they generally do not use it. Men, on the other hand adhere to the popular assumption as the result shows that they indeed use taboo more than women.

It has also been observed through the questionnaire that sex and sexual organs are regarded as the most sensitive taboo related topic and avoided by the general population as it is considered vulgar and crude for normal discourse. Death comes second and is mentioned euphemistically so as to avoid offending other people. Contrary to their negative attitudes towards taboo words, the participants reveals that they do not fall short in using it. The result shows that the participants chose close intimacy with friends as the most comfortable environment for discussing or using taboo words. In general discourse, taboo words are replaced by their euphemistic alternate.

The interviews showed that use of euphemisms may vary from one person to another based on their social conditions. Social upbringing of a child and the social environment are the general contributing factors. Various psychological reasons like anger and insult are mentioned to induce a person to use taboo words in unusual circumstances. It has also been gathered that even amongst the euphemisms in existence there is a certain varying degree of acceptability. Some euphemisms are deemed more intolerable than others.

Through the various investigations and analysis, a conclusion has been drawn that Mizo has two types of taboos: 1) one with euphemism and 2) another with euphemism, which are further sub-categorized (Table 1). The euphemisms are then divided into three levels of sensitivity i.e. high, mid and low (Table 11). The study also provides insightful information relating to the socio-cultural background which influences the linguistic and the attitudes towards certain topic in the Mizo community.

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