



Article

English Words Interpreted as Taboo in Arabic: A Pragmatic Study

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Abstract: Language reflects culture. Words according to that culture may load multi connotations depending on the socio-cultural context of the speech event. This study shows how English words can be interpreted as taboo in Arabic culture according to the pragmatic and socio-cultural elements that lead to this interpretation. This study illustrates how these words bring different meanings, may be considered as irrelevant, offensive, or even forbidden in Arabic regions, as well as proving that having a well understanding of the sociocultural and pragmatic norms make a safe communication. Furthermore, assuring the difference in sociolinguistic variables brings various attitudes about the acceptance of English words. Under the consideration of pragmatic analysis, this article checks the sociocultural variables, politeness norms and cultural sensitivity which surround these connotations. Data is collected from media discourse, interviews, and social media communications, enhanced by a descriptive analysis and some of rendering strategies and case study.

Keywords: Taboo Words, Pragmatic Strategies, Sociolinguistic Variables, Politeness

1. Introduction

Taboo language vs cross-cultural communication

Taboo language differs across cultures, reflecting social structures, beliefs, religious norms, and historical perspectives. As noted by [1], taboo words often center on sensitive topics such as sexuality, religion, and death. In Arabic societies, cultural and religious taboos are deeply intertwined, making certain English expressions appear offensive [2]. Arabic speakers perceive words related to religion and moral connotations as highly sensitive, leading to prohibitions when translating equivalents. For instance, terms like “sex” or “nude” may be openly discussed in English-speaking cultures but are avoided in conservative Arabic contexts [2]. Similarly, phrases involving blasphemy are considered exceptionally sensitive due to their sacred religious significance.

The concept of pragmatic failure plays a crucial role in analyzing cross-cultural communication [3]. Such communication occurs between speakers of different cultures, where conflicting pragmatic norms may result in unintended misunderstandings.

Pragmatic and Sociocultural Context

Gumperz argues that pragmatic intentions are tied to social and cultural contexts, increasing the likelihood of misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication.

Sociolinguistics and Taboo

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Sociolinguistics reflects societal identity and power dynamics in language use. As noted by Wardhaugh, taboo words often correlate with social hierarchies and mirror cultural beliefs. In Arabic culture, age, gender, and social status significantly influence language choices. Holmes observes that younger generations adopt English loanwords (including taboo terms) more readily than older generations, reflecting modernity, globalisation, or a rejection of tradition.

Trudgill highlights code-switching as a key sociolinguistic feature, where speakers alternate languages to navigate sensitive topics[4]. Arabic speakers, for instance, may use English words like "toilet" to avoid formal Arabic equivalents deemed inappropriate. Similarly, English employs euphemisms (e.g., "passed away" for "died") to mitigate offence [5].

Politeness Theory and Face-Saving

Brown and Levinson [6] explain how language preserves public "face" (self-image). Arabic speakers often employ face-saving strategies (euphemisms, indirectness) in formal settings [7]. In intercultural communication, face-threatening acts (FTAs) are minimized through indirectness or borrowing emotionally neutral terms from other languages [6].

Cultural Pragmatics and Sensitivity

Cultural pragmatics examines how norms shape language. Wierzbicka [8] emphasizes that word meanings are culture-bound; a neutral English term (e.g., "condom") may offend Arabic speakers due to religious-moral values. Tannen [9] stresses cultural sensitivity—selecting context-appropriate words to avoid offense. For example, "gay" may be clinical in English but taboo in Arabic contexts [8], [9].

2. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive method to illustrate how English words can be considered taboo in Arabic-speaking cultures. Data are collected from media discourse, social media interactions, interviews, and corpus texts.

Media discourse includes samples from English TV programs, radio shows, and films dubbed into Arabic, where words such as "bastard" or "asshole" are either deleted or replaced with suitable equivalents [10]. On the other hand, social media provides posts from Arabic-speaking users who tend to use English words considered taboo in Arabic culture, such as "sexy" and "F***," reflecting a trend among younger users on platforms like Facebook and Twitter [11], [12].

Additionally, interview samples demonstrate how participants navigate English taboo words when addressing Arabic-speaking audiences. Corpus samples, taken from translated literary works and subtitled films, reveal that translators often employ omission or euphemistic equivalents to avoid taboo words [13].

The analysis relies on multiple frameworks:

Thomas's and Kasper & Blum-Kulka's models to examine pragmatic failure arising from cultural differences[14],[15].

Brown & Levinson's politeness theory to analyze indirect strategies and euphemisms used to avoid offense.

Wardhaugh's and Holmes's sociolinguistic theories to explore variations based on social level, gender, and age.

The Analysis Procedures

Data Analysis Procedures

For each data sample, the following procedures will be adopted, depending on the context and treatment of taboo words:

- a. Contextual Situation: Analysis of the setting, participants, audience, and medium where the word is used [11].

- b. Reaction and Perception: Examination of Arabic speakers' responses to English taboo words based on social traditions and public viewpoints [12].
- c. Pragmatic Techniques: Evaluation of how politeness strategies, code-switching, or euphemisms mitigate the impact of taboo words [13].
- d. Cultural Sensitivity and Translational Strategies: Investigation of translators' approaches to taboo words, including:

Omission: Deleting highly offensive terms (Hatim & Mason)

Substitution: Replacing taboo words with euphemisms (Allan & Burridge)

Translation Methods: Choosing between literal meaning or culturally appropriate equivalents (Baker)

Data Analysis

Data consists of 20 samples, taken from (media discourse, social media, interviews, and corpus analysis), and will be analysed according to the methodological procedures and models adopted previously.

Sample 1:	"Sexy"
Context:	An English movie subtitled into Arabic, where a character referring to another as "sexy".
Analysis:	The word "sexy" translated into Arabic as "جميلة جدا" (very beautiful) to avoid the sexual tones related to the original.
Pragmatic technique:	Euphemism is used here to soften the real meaning as it is considered inappropriate in Arabic culture.
Cultural awareness:	In Family-friendly contexts, Arabs tend to avoid using sexual utterances overtly.
Sample 2:	"Goddamn"
Context:	The word "Goddamn" is used many times in a subtitled American TV show, broadcasted in Arabic – speaking country.
Analysis:	The translator replaced "Goddamn" with "اللعة" (curse) to avoid referring to "God" in a prohibited way for Arabs.
Politeness technique:	Here, the translator adhered to the religious norms of Arabic society, by removing the reference to God, as it is deeply offensive to invoke God in vain.
Sociolinguistic variables:	The translation assures the high value awareness of the religious respect in public media.
Sample 3:	"Ass"
Context:	An Arabic speaker' post in Twitter, using the English word "ass" to describe someone in rude.
Analysis:	The replies for using the word "ass" with its informal context was disapproved because of its inappropriateness in Arabic.
Pragmatic Failure:	Here, the user failed to know that English informal terms may have more weight in Arabic, and will be received as totally rude .
Sociolinguistic Variables:	The post's creator was an adult, trying to show the division in generations, of adopting English taboo words into Arabic speech.

Sample 4:	"Gay"
Context:	The word "gay" was used during an Arabic news report mentioned LGBTQ+ rights.
Analysis:	The word "gay" was translated as "مثلي الجنس" (homosexual), to avoid using the English term directly.
Cultural sensitivity:	Reflecting social discomfort with the subjects related to sexual orientation, Arabic media tends to use more formal or clinical expressions in such topics.
Pragmatic strategy of translating	Since the Arabic society is a conservative one, literal translation is avoided here to avoid provoking a strong reaction.

Sample 5:	"Shit"
Context:	Through an Arabic dubbed American show, one of the characters said "shit" expressing a shock of something going wrong.
Analysis:	The word was neglected completely in the Arabic version without using any equivalent.
Politeness strategy:	This deletion shows an avoidance technique, in which the translator chose not to put any offensive expression to keep the politeness norms of the Arabic culture.
Cultural pragmatics:	The use of curses and insults publicly, especially in media, is completely considered unacceptable in Arabic – speaking settings

Sample 6:	"Bastard"
Context:	In An English film subtitled with Arabic, a character calls another one as a "bastard".
Analysis:	The term was rendered into Arabic as "سافل" (lowly person), reducing platitudes while keeping the negative meaning.
pragmatic strategy:	Using euphemistic expression to soften the insult, to make it more appropriate culturally for Arabic – speaking people.
Sociolinguistic variables:	The translator was completely aware of the fact that illegitimacy is highly forbidden in Arabic culture.

Sample 7:	"Nude"
Context:	In a social media interview with an artist contained a discussion about nude art.
Analysis:	The word "nude" was translated into Arabic as "عاري" (bare), but with an obvious hesitation from the interviewer trying to shift the topic to another one.
Pragmatic strategy:	The interviewer here alleviates the discomfort, through using an indirect strategy to keep politeness, by quickly shifting to another topic
Cultural sensitivity:	Within the Arabic conservative cultures, especially in public environment, topics about

nudity are avoided because they are too sensitive.	
Sample 8:	"F***"
Context:	In a video post, an Arabic-speaking social media vlogger used the word "F***".
Analysis:	Despite the most majority of the vlogger's followers were young people, there are a lot of comments condemning the use of such a rude word within an Arabic context.
Pragmatic Failure:	The vlogger tried to be trendy and relatable by using this word but led to a pragmatic failure where many comments found the language used was unsuitable.
Sociolinguistic variables:	This shows the generational change in attitudes for using English insults, in which the old generation considered it offensive.
Sample 9:	"Condom"
Context:	The word "condom" translated into Arabic during an English health advertisement.
Analysis:	The word "condom" rendered into Arabic as "وسيلة منع الحمل" (contraceptive device), to avoid referring overtly to sexual protection.
Politeness strategy:	The use of euphemistic substitution made the advertisement more acceptable for the conservative people
Cultural sensitivity:	In Arabic, and due to the forbidden surrounding discuss of sex, euphemisms are always used to avoid the direct reference to sexual health.
Sample 10:	"Kiss"
Context:	Within an Arabic dubbed romantic movie. The character said "Kiss me"
Analysis:	The translation of the phrase was "اقترب مني" (come close to me), to avoid direct mentioning of physical affection.
Pragmatic strategy:	Using indirect language helps softening the overtone of romantic expression to cope with the cultural beliefs of the Arabic audience
Cultural sensitivity:	The Arabic-speaking people, especially the conservative ones, mostly see the overt expressing of affection as unsuitable.
Sample 11:	"Damn"
Context:	Through a WhatsApp chat among friends, an Arabic person used the word "Damn".
Analysis:	Some of the chatters saw it as amusing, while the others expressed discomfort because of the obvious disrespect.
Politeness strategy:	In order to balance the conversation, some of the participants opposed the term by using religious utterances like "الحمد لله" (praise be to Allah).

Sociolinguistic variables:	The mixed reactions of the group, show various levels for the religious considerations.
Sample 12: "Screw"	
Context:	Within an informal meeting, an Arabic person used the English phrase "screw this" in a communication.
Analysis:	This phrase reflects rude impression by some, although its equivalent in Arabic is "تبا" but it not used.
Cultural pragmatics:	The strategy used here is code-switching in order to soften the impact of the real meaning, but it is not seen like this by many interlocutors who considered it offensive.
Sociolinguistic variables:	According to the generational difference, some of the people accept the term use while others saw it as a disrespectful use.
Sample 13: "Naked"	
Context:	The word "naked" was mentioned in an English online essay expressing the concept of naked truth, translated into Arabic.
Analysis:	The phrase was translated as "الحقيقة المجردة" (the bare truth) to evade mentioning nudity.
Pragmatic strategy:	Implementing a metaphorical rather than literal translation to keep the real meaning of the original and be away from taboo subjects.
Cultural sensitivity:	Referring to nudity is avoided in formal Arabic texts, because of the high cultural sensitivity. So literal translation is avoided in such cases.
Sample 14: "Hot"	
Context:	In an English song, the phrase "you're so hot" was played in an Arabic radio station.
Analysis:	The phrase was not translated into Arabic. It was omitted in the Arabic version.
Politeness strategy:	The strategy of omission reflects the cultural unwillingness to mention topics about physical attraction publicly.
Cultural pragmatics:	Implications of sexual attraction are often avoided in Arabic media.
Sample 15: "Bitch"	
Context:	Through an English online forum, an Arabic – speaking user posted the word "bitch" within an argument.
Analysis:	The word made strong feedback from other users who found it highly inappropriate.
Pragmatic Failure:	The user's intention to show frustration using English words led to a collapse in polite interaction.
Sociolinguistic variables:	The user seems to belong to the youngest aged slice, but the older ones in the forum convicted the use of such crudity, reflecting generational behaviors.

Sample 16:	"Porn"
Context:	An English online news headline discussing pornography was rendered into Arabic.
Analysis:	To reflect an indirect and formal method, the word "porn" was translated into Arabic as "مواد اباحية" (explicit materials).
politeness strategy:	Through using a clinical term, the translation decreases the socio-cultural discomfort of referring to pornography.
Cultural sensitivity:	Such topics are always considered taboo and euphemized in translation to make them less offensive.

Sample 17:	"Crap"
Context:	the word "crap" was said by an Arabic user in the comments section of a YouTube video.
Analysis:	Some users disapprove the use of this word, though younger commenters saw it acceptable.
Cultural pragmatics:	The word "crap" is perceived somehow naturally in English cultures, but in Arabic it is still has negative implications.
Sociolinguistic variables:	The younger Arabic interlocutors are more open to use English insults, while the older ones see them as unsuitable.

Sample 18:	"Fart"
Context:	The word "fart" was used in an English children's cartoon, which was dubbed into Arabic.
Analysis:	It is translated into Arabic as "ريح" (wind), to avoid the cruder term.
Pragmatic strategy:	To maintain politeness, euphemism is used, especially in media directed to children.
Cultural sensitivity:	In contexts related to children, bodily functions are often euphemized.

Sample 19:	"Suck"
Context:	The phrase "you suck" was used by an Arabic speaking gamer while playing online.
Analysis:	sparking an argument in the chatting, the phrase was seen as highly offensive by the Arabic-speaking society.
Pragmatic failure:	The gamer's use of the English slang led to a pragmatic failure because of the lack in knowing the cultural connotations in Arabic.

Sociolinguistic variables:	The online context allows more area for using casual language, but cultural beliefs around respecting remained strong.
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Sample 20:	"Hell"
Context:	In a seminar, the word "hell" was said by an Arabic-speaking professor describing a difficult case.
Analysis:	The word brings discomfort especially to more religious presence, who prefer to avoid such words in academic environment.
Pragmatic strategy:	The professor quickly transformed to more neutral use of language to decrease the fault.
Sociolinguistic variables:	The use of such words is seen unprofessional in formal settings, especially if religious sensitivity is present.

3. Results and Discussion

Throughout the conducted analysis of the chosen samples. It is obvious that there is a complex conflict between English and Arabic in the consideration of the taboo words and how they are affecting the perception to the Arabic receiver. In media discourse, the utterances related to bodily functions, sexuality and irreligious content are often being controlled or euphemized to cope with the Arabic culture beliefs. Furthermore, social media communications reflect the sociolinguistic variables and how they influence the reactions of the users towards some English taboo words, where the younger people see them as acceptable, while the older ones consider them offensive.

In interviews, the participants tend to take care about the context and the audience. That means the use of an English word in a causal interview or online differs from that uttered in an academic or a religious one. So, the environment of the interview and the audience govern the language used, whether the word used considered taboo or not. Moreover, the corpus data provide a description of how translators treat some English taboo words in subtitles of the films or dubbed movies, either by choosing equivalents or even omit them from the translated version.

As a result, the pragmatic strategies such as code-switching and euphemisms, indirect reference helped so much in avoiding discomfort and rudeness coming from English taboo words used in Arabic-speaking area.

4. Conclusion

The study comes up with the following conclusions:

- Within cross-cultural communication, the pragmatic comprehension of the English words as taboo in Arabic – speaking cultures reflects the essence of cultural sensitivity.
- Implications of the English words which are neutral or playful in their origins may arise strong responses when used in Arabic, relying on the sociocultural context and the violated social beliefs.
- Understanding the appropriate language use, by knowing the pragmatic and cultural extents, is essential to avoid being impolite and keep the communication flow successful.
- Socio-pragmatic variables among generations plays a big role in considering an English word, whether it's acceptable or offensive.

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