

## **Linguistic Taboo and Evil Words in Persian Culture**

Ali Taslimi<sup>1\*</sup>  
Eghbal Taslimi<sup>2</sup>

**Received: 2017/11/20**

**Accepted: 2018/3/17**

### **Extended abstract**

#### **1- Introduction**

The study of linguistic taboos and evil words is an issue which many scholars in different areas of humanities such as anthropology, psychology, sociology and linguistics have dealt with, out of their concern for moral and cultural values. Taboo can be defined as a prohibition against a great force that is both sacred and accursed, and in sociolinguistics, it is the words the usage of which is prohibited and considered to be shameful and hated. In order to eschew using taboos, we use other words or foreign words, a technique that is called euphemism. In Old and Middle Persian, cacophonous words were used for devils and pleasant words were for gods. Ancient Persian dialect (Dari) cacophonous words were used for devils and by doing so, the abomination was softened for the people who were not familiar with evil words. One of the techniques used in euphemism is using foreign words instead of the native words for taboos related to sex, excretion and shameful behaviors. This article investigates taboo language and its structural likeness to Persian evil words, based on binary opposition. The scope of this article includes the legendary and folk culture of Iran.

#### **2- Theoretical framework**

Regarding structural binary oppositions, intellectuals such as Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Levi-Strauss and A. J. Greimas have developed theories which can be expanded to affairs that are holy/unholy, beautiful/ugly and good/evil. Saussurian notion of 'minimal pairs' proposes binary oppositions in words; different signs cause meaning to be different. A language is a system of these signs in expressing ideas (Saussure, 2000:8).

---

1. Associate professor of Persian Language and Literature, University of Guilan,

\*Email: taslimy1340@yahoo.com.

2. MA in Persian Language and Literature, Payame Noor University.

Levi-Strauss considers such structures, especially the binary oppositions, to rule the minds of all human beings. "Prevalent attempts to explain alleged differences between the so-called primitive mind and scientific thought have resorted to qualitative difference between the working processes of the mind in both cases, while assuming that the entities which they were studying remained very much the same" (Levi-Strauss, 2000: 80). Levi-Strauss and Greimas have investigated the notion of taboo in the Oedipus myth, based on binary oppositions. A very significant opposition in mythologists' opinion is 'good/evil', which originates from dualities in religions and myths; in other words, the taboos like incest and patricide, which have taken roots in cultures, have always existed against Noa. Linguists extract the linguistic signs of taboos from cultures and propose the binary oppositions such as high/low, good/evil and permitted/prohibited. Therefore, "tabooed subjects can vary widely: sex, death, excretion, bodily functions, religious matters and politics. Tabooed objects that must be avoided or used carefully can include your mother-in-law, certain game animals, and use of your left hand (the origin of sinister)" (Wardhaugh, 2006:239). Such knowledge helps us to think about satanic and divine aspects of taboos and to find a structural affinity between tabooed and evil words.

### **3- Methodology**

This study employs an analytical methodology based on the 'binary oppositions' theory.

### **4- Results & Discussion**

It seems that the taboo words in Old Persian were divide into two parts: evil words for evil world and divine words for divine world. Purdavud has mentioned evil and divine names, words and works, and Dustkhah reminds their name such as Ahura (god)/Ahriman (Satan), Fereidun/Zahhak, Iran/Aniran (non-Iran), angel/demon, ameshaspandan/ kmarikan etc. (See. 1985: 374-384). Some evil words are still being used with a negative connotation, for instance the word "drayiidan" which means 'to say' (see. Abolghasemi, 1999: 41). This word is attributed to bad persons, but is considered taboo for persons of good qualities. Such duality in Iranian mind, either consciously or unconsciously, originates from ancient religions of Iran. Although Levi-Straus believes that dualism is in the nature of human mind, he does not deny that culture of a country is another factor which has an effect on the mind.

As mentioned before, many taboo words of the world, in spite of cultural difference, are related to concepts of sex and excretion. Like the use of left hand that is considered sinister in religions, some deeds have been known as taboos, at least if they are done in public. In this regard, evil words should be avoided and substituted with euphemism. For such purposes, in Old Persian, divine words were used. There are other mechanisms of euphemism in Persian language: use of foreign (Aniranian) words such as 'mostarah' (rest room), abbreviation signs (W.C.), and metaphorical and virtual compositions like 'dastshuyi' (hand washing). Also, sometimes it is used as humor or parody.

### 5- Conclusions & Suggestions

The notion of 'taboo' originates from oppositions and dualities. Such dualities usually include moral, ideological, mythical, and also black and white aspects. Nearly all religions and cultures hold these aspects; however, the religions of Old Persia consciously separated evil and divine words. It is not vain that theologians consider duality to be a Zoroastrian phenomenon. Iranians avoid using taboo words through different mechanisms, one of which is using euphemism against evil words. Finally, it is suggested that this method can be studied in other countries and languages too.

**Key words:** taboo, evil words, duality, foreign language, Iranian culture.

### References

1. Abolghasemi, M. (1999). *Vocabulary of the Persian language*. Tehran: Golchin Adab Press. [In Persian].
2. ————. (1994). *The roots of Persian verbs*. Tehran: Qoqnus Publications. [In Persian].
3. Bartholomae, C. (1979). *Altiranisches Woterbuch*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
4. Bateni, M. R. (1984). *Language in the service of null*. Tehran: Agah Publications.
5. Ferdowsi Tusi, A. (2012). *Shahnameh* [with the efforts of Jalal Khaleghi], The first book. Tehran: The Islamic Encyclopedia. [In Persian].
6. Foucault, M. (2005). *Discipline and punish* [Translated by N. Sarkhosh, and A. Jahandide]. Tehran: Nei Publications.

7. Freud, S. (1958). Totem and taboo. In James Strachery (Ed.), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 13. London: Hogarth,
8. Levi–Strauss, C. (1967). *Structural anthropology* [Translated by C. Jacobson and B. G. Schoef]. London: Allen Lane.
9. Mackenzie, D.N. (1971). *A concise Pahlavi dictionary*. London: Oxford University Press.
10. Modarresi, Y. (1989). *An introduction to sociolinguistics*. Tehran: Motaleat Farhangi. [In Persian].
11. Nilipur, R. (1984). *Aphasia and bilingualism*. Tehran: Agah Publications. [In Persian].
12. Propp, V. (2000). Oedipus in the Light of Folklore, in martin mcquillan (ed.), *The narrative reader*. London and New York: Rutledge.
13. Purdavud, E. (1985). “Avesta” Edited by Jalil Dustkhah. Tehran, Morvarid. [In Persian].
14. Ruh-ol-amini, M. (2010). *Around the city with lights*. Tehran: Attar press. [In Persian].
15. Sa’di Shirazi, M. (2001). *Sonnets* [Collected by Kazem Bargnisi]. Tehran: Fekre Ruz. [In Persian].
16. Saussure, F. de. (2000). The object of study, in David Lodge with Nigel Wood (eds.), *Modern Criticism and Theory*. London: Longman.
17. Skeat, W. W. (1993). *Concise Dictionary of English Etymology*. Great Britain: Wordsworth Reference.
18. Steinberg, D, and Natalia V. S. (2006). *An introduction to psycholinguistics*. Great Britain: Pearson Longman.
19. Taslimi, A. (2011). *The legends of Guilan*. Rasht: Farhang Iliia. [In Persian].
20. Todorof, T. (1998). *Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogism*, [Translated by Daryush karimi]. Tehran: Markaz. [In Persian].
21. Wardhaugh, R. (2006). *An introduction to sociolinguistics*. London and New York: Blackwell, Publishing.
22. Yule, G. (1999). *The study of language*. Cambridge University Press.