American Journal Of Social Sciences And Humanity Research

VOLUME Vol.05 Issue06 2025
PAGE NO. 108-112
DOI 10.37547/ajsshr/Volume05Issue06-28

Taboo and Euphemism: A Linguistic and Cultural Approach in Uzbek And German Languages

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Received: 26 April 2025; **Accepted:** 22 May 2025; **Published:** 24 June 2025

Abstract: This study provides a cross-cultural and linguistic analysis of taboo and euphemism in Uzbek and German. Both linguistic phenomena serve as mechanisms to navigate culturally sensitive topics, often shaped by religious, moral, and social norms. In Uzbek, euphemisms are deeply rooted in religious traditions and family values, while in German, they reflect ideals of openness, egalitarianism, and psychological sensitivity. The article investigates various categories of taboo and euphemism such as naming traditions, religious expressions, family discourse, and grammatical structures. It demonstrates that, despite cultural differences, both languages utilize similar linguistic tools—metaphor, metonymy, and affixation—to express politeness and maintain social harmony. Findings contribute to a broader understanding of how language reflects cultural identity and ethical frameworks.

Keywords: Taboo, Euphemism, Uzbek language, German language, Linguistic culture, Religious values, Speech etiquette.

Introduction: This research builds upon Omonturdiyev's framework and affirms that taboo and euphemism emerge from a complex interaction of sociocultural, religious, and psychological factors. These linguistic phenomena reflect a community's worldview and communicative conventions.

Taboos formed from religious and mythological sources have existed since ancient times. In early societies, taboos were imposed upon objects, actions, individuals, or words deemed sacred or forbidden. These prohibitions were rooted in spiritual beliefs concerning spirits, deities, or divine forces.

Religion serves as a major carrier of taboo concepts. Religious prohibitions are not codified laws but moral and divine imperatives, which align directly with taboo. For instance, the Islamic concept of 'gunoh' (sin) refers to actions that contravene divine will. Such actions are not considered legal offenses but moral violations. Similar taboos appear in Christianity ('sin') and Judaism ('tame').

Taboo also manifests in religious practice: for example, restrictions on pronouncing certain words, rituals of purification, or prohibitions on entering sacred spaces while in a state of impurity. In Islam, ablution (tahorat) is required before prayer, and one may not enter sacred spaces when ritually impure (najosat). These practices reinforce both spiritual and moral discipline.

In ancient mythologies—such as Greek, Roman, Indian, Slavic, and Norse—taboos were enforced through divine narratives. For example, Prometheus in Greek mythology is punished by Zeus for giving fire to humanity, as fire was considered a divine gift. Similarly, the Biblical story of Adam and Eve illustrates divine prohibition and the consequences of its violation.

The formation of taboos and euphemisms is influenced by multiple factors, one of which is belief in word magic. In early stages of cultural development, there existed a notion of a natural link between an object and its name, which led to identification (i.e., equating or associating the word with the thing it denotes). This gave rise to the belief in the magical power of words and to taboo attitudes toward certain terms. According to Freud, taboos are not always rationally motivated but are associated with fear, shame, and other emotions.

It is important to note that words often derive their

power from religious, mythological, or social values, and some words are considered too frightening to be used directly due to their association with tragic or fearful events. For example, in many cultures, modified or softened expressions are used to avoid mentioning death, illness, or the evil eye, which demonstrates the protective function of language and its capacity to safeguard mental well-being.

Over time, psychological and moral-ethical factors have influenced the process of euphemization to varying degrees. These ancient taboos are preserved even today in the form of rituals and traditions. Additionally, the ancient belief in the magical power of words is still observed in folk oral traditions and everyday speech.

For example, before significant challenges or events, people may use reverse-meaning phrases as a form of positive wishing. In Russian, the phrase “Ни пуха, ни пера” literally means “no fluff, no feather,” but actually conveys the wish “good luck.” This expression is widespread and sometimes complemented by variants like “Ни хвоста, ни чешуи” (“May you have neither tail nor scale”).

In German, the traditional phrase “Weidmanns Heil!” has historical roots and was used to wish hunters success. While this expression is now rarely used in everyday language, it still exists. In Uzbek, positive wishes are expressed in a direct affirmative form, such as “May your journey be blessed”, “May your road be safe”, or “May your work go smoothly.”

Additionally, the expression “Ko‘z tegmasin” (“May the evil eye not strike you”) is commonly used to ward off negative consequences.

In German, there are phrases used to avoid negative influences or to wish someone well, rooted in ancient oral beliefs. For example, „Ich drücke die Daumen“ (“I’m pressing my thumbs”) is a way to wish luck. The expression “Hals und Beinbruch” (“May you break your neck and leg”) is used to encourage someone and wish them success. This is analogous in meaning to “Good luck” or “May your work go well” in Uzbek.

A name is not merely an identifier; it is a reflection of a people’s historical experience, worldview, religious beliefs, and aesthetic values.

Throughout history, names have evolved in close connection with a person’s life, destiny, and place within the social environment. According to historian Sh. O‘ljayeva, the name given to a newborn is believed to influence their fate; over time, cultural perceptions have developed around the idea that names can be blessed or unfortunate. This belief transformed names into protective symbols — entities that are spiritually tied to the individual and accompany them as lifelong companions.

In this way, a category of names known as “protective names” or “guardian names” emerged.

In addition to the usual customs and requirements of naming among Turkic peoples, linguist A. Omonturdiyev outlines several other reasons in his book “Professional Speech Euphemics”:

If a child or adolescent bearing an official name (especially one associated with God, prophets, saints, or even names of zodiac signs) suffers from a chronic illness and seems unable to “carry” the name, it is believed that the name does not suit them. In such cases, the original name is replaced or supplemented with a humble euphemistic name. As a result, the child ends up with a double name—one official and one euphemistic. The latter functions as a protective or safeguarding name.

In families where children are repeatedly born but die young, the next newborn—regardless of gender—is given names such as O‘lmas, Tursun, Turg‘un, Umrzoq, Sotiboldi, Xudoyberdi, Yashar, Turdiboy, Toshtemir, Bo‘ri, Arslon, etc. These names serve as protective, guarding, or euphemistic designations intended to shield the child from calamity, evil eye, and malevolent spirits by confusing or deceiving them.

In Christian culture, giving a child the name of a saint or holy figure is considered a way to protect the child from harm and provide divine support. Such names include Johannes, Maria, Matthias, and Gabriel. These names carry a religious character, and it is believed that the child is under “holy protection.”According to Wilfried Seibicke, many German names have religious meanings and were given during the Middle Ages with the purpose of placing the child under the protection of a sacred figure. Moreover, names often carry positive semantic meanings and symbolic significance that express virtues or protection. In German culture, some names can be seen as wishing a “positive path for the child’s fate.” Names such as Felix (happy, lucky), Benedikt (blessed), Siegfried (victory + peace), Wolfgang (wolf’s path), Friedrich (peace), Heinrich (protector of the home) are examples of this. Some of these names also reflect powerful animal or symbolic images (wolf, eagle, lion), which shows a spiritual similarity to Turkic names like Bo‘ri (wolf) and Arslon (lion). Many German names have religious connotations and were given in the Middle Ages to place the child under the protection of a holy person.

Compliance with moral and aesthetic requirements of speech. In any society, speech culture holds an important place. The use of delicacy and respectful expression in conveying reality is a requirement of ethical conduct. If these norms are violated, words lose

their impact, provoke dissatisfaction in meaning, and elicit negative emotions in the listener. When moral norms are disregarded, speech not only loses its effectiveness but also its charm and educational power. In society, open expression of certain topics and realities may be limited for various reasons. In such cases, it becomes necessary to express thoughts through euphemism—that is, in a soft and indirect manner. In this process, a person's overall level of education, taste, mental world, worldview, moral upbringing, intellectual capacity, speech culture, wit, responsiveness, professional experience, age, social status, and level of etiquette all play an important role.

In Uzbek oral speech, the topic of death is often expressed not directly, but through euphemistic forms. For example, phrases such as ""to'rt kunligi qolgan", "umri bitganday", "vaqti-soati yaqin", "ko'zidan nur so'nibdi", "xuftonga qolmaydigan ko'rinadi" imply the approach of death, yet without harshness or bluntness.

In German, similar euphemistic expressions indicating that someone is near death include: "jemandes Tage sind gezählt" ("their days are numbered"), "nicht mehr lange zu leben haben" ("doesn't have long to live"), and "schon wissen, wohin die Reise geht" ("already knows where the journey is headed"). These expressions reflect the speaker's moral sensitivity and the intention to convey a difficult truth with respect and consideration.

Sometimes, even when a person has already passed away, this reality is not stated directly in words. In such situations, non-verbal gestures—such as bringing a hand to the face—are used to imply that "he/she is no longer with us."

According to Uzbek family traditions, there are various forms of address used among family members. For instance, it is not customary—nor is it culturally acceptable—for a husband or wife to directly address each other by their given names. Even if the wife's name is Ruxsora and the daughter's name is Nigora, due to norms of etiquette and modesty, the husband may address his wife using the name of their daughter or son instead.

Additionally, the husband may refer to his wife using terms like onasi ("mother"), ayasi ("her mother"), bekam ("my lady"), or xonim ("ma'am"), while the wife may address her husband with expressions like dadasi ("father"), dadajonisi ("dear father"), or xo'jayin ("master" or "head of the household"). These forms of address, as well as their process of becoming euphemistic or tabooed, reflect the ethical and aesthetic norms of speech shaped by long-standing traditions, customs, and moral codes.

In German, by contrast, spouses more commonly address each other directly by first name, a practice known as Vornamenanrede. A husband might call his wife "Anna" or "Klara," and the wife might refer to her husband as "Thomas" or "Markus." This practice reflects the values of equality, personal freedom, and openness in modern German society.

However, euphemistic and affectionate forms are also widespread in German: spouses often use endearing terms such as Schatz ("my treasure"), Liebling ("darling"), Süße/Süßer ("sweetheart"), or Hase ("bunny") to address each other. These expressions are aesthetically gentle, emotionally warm, and highlight the figurative and softening qualities of language.

In the traditional family culture of the Uzbek people—especially in the speech of a bride (kelin)—the way one addresses others is considered an important moral standard. A bride typically does not directly refer to her husband, father-in-law, mother-in-law, sister-in-law, or other in-laws by their first names. Instead, she uses euphemistic forms of address that she has either been taught or created herself. Common expressions include: "ayajon/oyijon" ("dear mother"), "dadajon/adajon" ("dear father"), "kichik qiz" ("younger girl"), "kichik uka" ("younger brother"), "katta opa" ("older sister"), or even collective references like "ular" ("they") and "uydagilar" ("those at home").

This linguistic phenomenon is rooted in social distance, respect, behavioral norms, and codes of etiquette between younger and older generations. In Uzbek culture, directly naming someone—especially by a bride—is viewed as a breach of propriety or social decorum. Thus, the use of euphemistic names serves not only as a tool of linguistic aesthetics, but also functions as a voluntary language etiquette system, reinforcing values of respect and modesty in interpersonal communication.

In German family culture, it is customary and accepted to address relatives by their first names. For example, it is not considered strange for a daughter-in-law to call her husband's father and mother directly "Hans" or "Ingrid." This practice corresponds to values of personal individuality, equality, and social closeness in Germany. However, such openness and directness are voluntary and variable. In some families, formal forms of address like "Herr Meier" or "Frau Schmidt" toward parents-in-law may still be maintained. This depends on family culture and personal relationships. Furthermore, there are no fixed naming traditions; rather, individualized approaches prevail.

The formation of taboos and euphemisms is based on the speaker's personal needs and subjective perceptions. Euphemistic meaning can be expressed

not only through words, phrases, or sentences (verbal speech), but also through nonverbal and kinetic methods. Additionally, certain grammatical forms in the language — using affixes — can also convey euphemistic meanings. In other words, some affixes enrich the original meaning (denotation) of a word or sentence with expressions of respect, affection, endearment, or diminishment, softening the reality and expressing it with a pleasant, euphonious tone. These suffixes in Uzbek include possessive suffixes, affixoid modal forms (xon, jon, bek, bonu), and plural suffixes.

Possessive suffixes:

In Uzbek, possessive suffixes often serve to express affection, respect, or closeness in euphemistic and poetic ways. For example:

"O‘n bir yildan beri musofirman, amirzodam." (P. Qodirov, Yulduzli tunlar)

"Sen yetim emassan, Tinchlan, jigarim. Quyoshday mehribon Vataning – onang, Zaminday vazminu Mehnatkash, mushfiq, Istagan narsangni tayyorlaguvchi…" (G‘. G‘ulom, Sen yetim emassan).

Affixoid modal forms:

These are suffix-like elements used to add modal or emotional coloring to words, often expressing affection, politeness, or social status. Example:

"Nima bo‘lsa hamki, Zebixonning bir damlik suhbati, bir payt ashulasi, oy kabi jamoli, qaddi barkamolidan bahramand bo‘lsinlar." (G‘. G‘ulom, Netay).

Plural suffixes:

Plural forms in polite speech can signal respect or formality, even when referring to a single person. Examples:

"Dadam dam olgani kirib ketdilar, biror soat uxlab oladilar." (S. Ahmad, Jimjitlik)

"Oliy darajadagi mehmonimiz rafiqalari bilan keldilar." (S. Ahmad, Jimjitlik).

Diminutive/endearment suffixes:

Used to show tenderness, love, or emotional closeness, especially in familial or emotional speech. Example:

"Oh, onaginang o‘rgilsin, bolam, sen endi sallotga ketayotibsan, xudoyo xudovando, yomon ko‘zdan saqlasin…" (G‘. G‘ulom, Shum bola).

In German, similar functions are served by diminutive suffixes like -chen and -lein, or by affectionate address forms. For example:

Kind → Kindchen (child → little child)

Hund → Hündchen (dog → little dog)

Schatzchen, Liebchen, Engelchen — terms of endearment adding emotional warmth.

Sample sentence from German:

Dann deckt die junge Frau ihr Kindchen wieder zu und wendet sich zum Gehen.

(Then the young woman covers up her little child again and prepares to leave.)

— Die Zeit, 20.01.1986, Nr. 030

This article has presented a comparative analysis of taboo and euphemism phenomena in Uzbek and German from a linguistic and cultural perspective. The findings demonstrate that in both languages, taboos are deeply connected to moral, religious, and social values, which naturally leads to the formation and use of euphemisms.

In Uzbek, euphemisms are primarily shaped by religious, moral, and family norms, and they emphasize respect, politeness, and indirectness. In contrast, German euphemisms are more influenced by ideals of individual freedom, openness, and political correctness.

Both languages create euphemisms through similar mechanisms—metaphor, metonymy, synonymy—highlighting universal linguistic strategies. The analysis also points to the necessity of further research in pragmatics, cultural linguistics, and word formation, particularly focusing on the role of euphemisms in modern communication and their ongoing evolution.

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