



A gender-and age-based study of “taboo words” in the speech of Persian speakers

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1. Introduction

Language, as a means of communication, is continually influenced by our society, which is why the reflection of social variables in our everyday speech is inevitable. Among different social factors, sociolinguistic researchers have extensively investigated the correlation between “gender” and linguistic categories to examine the language features of men and women. Lakoff & Bucholtz (2004) suggested that women’s speech is characterized by linguistic features such as precise color terms, polite forms (e.g., indirect requests), tag questions, and empathic stress. In this regard, Holmes (2013, p. 308) claimed that many of the features identified as the characteristics of women’s language are positive politeness devices expressing solidarity.

Politeness and “*taboo words*”, on the other hand, have been the focus of many sociolinguistic researches, such as Jay (2009), Batistella (2005) and Wardhaugh’s (2006). Jay (2009, p. 156) claims that both “gender” and “age” can affect word choice and frequency; men swear more frequently in public than women. As for age, the swearing rate peak in the teenage years and declines thereafter (Jay, 2009, p. 156). The present research aims to conduct a gender- and age-based study of “taboo words” in the everyday speech of Persian-speaking men and women and to answer the following questions:

1. How does “gender” affect the frequency and use of “taboo words” in the everyday speech of Persian speakers?
2. How the “age” of Persian speakers affect the use of “taboo words”?
3. Which types of “taboo words” do Persian speakers use in their speech?

2. Materials and methods

This research is a field survey benefiting from qualitative components and a quantitative approach. The aim is to perform a sociolinguistic analysis of “taboo words” focusing on the “gender” and “age” of the Persian-speaking men and women. To this end, a researcher-made questionnaire was designed and randomly distributed among 523 Persian-speaking men and women in 4 different age groups

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(15-25, 26-35, 36-45, and 45 years and older). The theoretical framework was based on Batisttella (2005), Jay (2009) and Wardhaugh’s (2006) proposed classification of taboo words. Statistical tests, including T-test, ANOVA, and Tukey, were used for data analysis. In this study, taboo words were classified as Epithets, Animal imagery, Bodily Excretions, Death and disease, Sex, and Politics and religion.

3. Results and discussion

This survey examined the effect of “gender” and “age” on the frequency and the use of “taboo words” in the everyday speech of Persian speakers. Regarding gender, the findings showed a significant difference between men and women in the use of taboo words ($P < 0.05$); the results are briefly summarized in Table 1:

Table 1.

The amount of the usage of taboo words in men and women(both in normal & in angry mood)

Situation	Gender	N	Average	Standard deviation	T	Degree of freedom	Significance level
Normal	woman	264	2.0558	.75164	-3.942	514.615	.000*
	man	259	2.3279	.82455			
Angry	woman	264	2.0587	.82433	-1.977	521	.049*
	man	259	2.1950	.74910			

Table 1 shows that men use more taboo words than women in both situations. Moreover, an analysis of the individual taboo words revealed that men tended to use stronger swear words than women. Epithets, animal imagery, and taboos related to sex, bodily excretions, and politics and religion were used more frequently by men. However, the average amount of using the category of “death and disease” taboos was more frequent in women’s speech.

In response to the second question, the results indicated that the difference between various age groups in the use of taboo words was statistically significant (see Table 2).

Table 2.

The Average use of taboo words in different age groups (both in normal & in angry mood)

Situation	Age group	N	Average	Standard deviation	F	Significance level
Normal	15-25	108	2.5043	.85692	18.157	.000*
	26-35	167	2.2994	.78394		
	36-45	125	2.1605	.74579		
	45 and older	123	1.7978	.65553		
Angry	15-25	108	2.4282	.82602	11.769	.000*
	26-35	167	2.1796	.72700		
	36-45	125	2.0760	.78045		
	45 and older	123	1.8394	.75145		

The data in Table 2 revealed that participants aged 15-25 used more taboo words than their peers in the other age groups in both situations. Furthermore, the results of the Tukey test showed that the 15-25-year-old participants used more taboo words than the other age groups both in angry mood and in normal speech. Additionally, the data suggested that the youngest group also used more forbidden taboo words classified under the categories of “sex”, “bodily excretions”, and “animal imagery”.

4. Conclusion

The results of the statistical tests showed that the rate of using taboo words by men and women in normal speech and in angry mood was significantly different ($P < 0.05$). To be more precise, men used more taboo words than women in both situations, and they typically used more taboo words with a higher degree of rudeness than women (“sexual issues”, “bodily excretions” and “epithets” categories). However, the average usage of taboo words related to the category of “death and disease” was more frequent in women’s speech. Furthermore, Tukey's test revealed that participants aged 15 to 25 years employed insulting expressions more frequently than other age groups, both in angry mood and in normal speech. Conversely, participants aged 45 years and older exhibited the lowest rate of taboo word usage in both emotional states. Therefore, it can be concluded that both “gender” and “age” influence the use of taboo words in the everyday speech of Persian speakers.

Keywords: taboo word, gender, age, sociolinguistics, Persian language.