Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Global Politics and Socio-Humanities
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2024.23278

Exploring the Influence of Chinese Cultural Background on Chinese-English Bilinguals' Use of Sexist Swear and Taboo Words: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract: There's evidence that bilingualism can significantly affect speakers' language use due to different levels of understanding of the cultures behind different languages and different abilities to perceive language's emotional and logical expression. This study narrows down the topic to Chinese and English sexist swear and taboo words (therefore S-T words) and explores the effect of cultural background on bilinguals' use of sexist S-T words in their first language and second language (therefore L1 and L2), giving out possible explanations of the interrelationship between cultural background and the use of sexist S-T words by reviewing previous literature. By making the comparative analysis between Chinese and English cultural backgrounds, this study finally infers that the ideology of sexism is reflected in both languages and cultures they belong to, while different rules of emotional expression, different language structures, and different attitudes towards sex in Chinese and Western cultures are possible factors that influence bilinguals' use of sexist S-T words in both languages. English is more open and direct on emotional expression, and the thought of individual liberalism supports individuals expressing their feelings; by contrast, China has the traditional thought of harmony, thus, Chinese speakers are more likely to express ideas implicitly. On the language structure aspect, as a high context culture with a pictographic writing system, Chinese is considered to be more offensive than English in the cognition of Chinese-English bilinguals. Moreover, Asians have more conservative sexual attitudes than their Hispanic and Euro-American peers.

Keywords: sexist swear and taboo words (S-T words), Chinese-English bilingualism, sexism, cultural background

1. Introduction

With the popularization of English education in China, the number of Chinese-English bilinguals has increased significantly in recent years. As a special language category common in daily life, taboo words, and the swear words, have their significant semantic function, and is crucial in cross-cultural communication.

The internal relationship of swearing and taboo phenomenon could be revealed from the swearing expression. According to Ljung, taboo words are included in the content of swearing. He also

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DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2024.23278

mentioned the commonality of swearing and taboo expression in different languages and deduced that the different perception of that expression is a result of 'different taboo word choices' [1]. Culture, as a nonnegligible factor of cross-linguistic study, is considered to be the main factor that influence the formation of Swearing and Taboo expression. And this difference could be shown in bilingual speaker more obviously due to their special bi-cultural background.

Several types of research suggest that some native Chinese-English speakers prefer English Swear and taboo words (therefore S-T words) when expressing emotion. Many comparative analysis attributes this phenomenon into the cultural difference. Few studies could focus on a specific category of S-T words and make comparisons based on related cultural backgrounds. Since there has been an increasing inclination among individuals to be more sensitive to what is commonly referred to as sexist language lately, this research will focus the sexist taboo words with discrimination specifically for females.

Thus, this research catches the gap in exploring the influence of the cultural background of China on the use of English sexist taboo words among Chinese-English bilinguals and deep in by connecting relevant research.

The final goal of this research is to answer the question of how the cultural background of China influences Chinese-English bilinguals' use of sexist taboo words in Chinese and English. In order to solve this problem logically, the general research question in separated into several subquestions: (1) What is the definition of taboo words and sexist taboo words? (2) How does bilingualism influence thinking and behavior? (3) What are the differences when bilinguals using taboo words in native language and non-native language? (4) How the cultural background influence the use of sexist taboo words among Chinese-English bilinguals?

2. Literature review

2.1. S-T words and sexist S-T words

A taboo word refers to a word that people consider offensive or that shocks them; for example, the words refer to sexism, which is the variety we discuss in this research. A swear word can be defined as a rude or offensive word used, for example, to express anger [2]. Since the object group of this research is Chinese-English bilinguals who take Chinese as their native language and English as their second language, we chose the Oxford Advanced English-Chinese Dictionary (10th Edition), which is the dictionary most commonly used by the bilinguals in this paper, to explain the definition of taboo words. In this study, in order to avoid ambiguity caused by different definitions, we will use S-T words (swear-taboo words) as a general term for the research object. Taboo words are subjects that are sanctioned or restricted on both institutional and individual levels under the conception that speaking a taboo term may cause damage. While the precise nature of the harm that may affect the speaker, listener, or society is still unclear [3]. This research will focus on the taboo words and swear words being banned because of the semantic meaning on individual levels, regardless of the institutional taboo words.

Language shows the social status and social distance of members in social interaction, this would be more obvious in S-T words due to its speciality and marginality. According to Deming Liao, S-T words frustrate the emotions of victims by putting them in an insulted and oppressed position [4]. This corresponds with Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence reveals the relationship between language production and symbolic power, "a transformed (misrecognizable, transfigured, and legitimated) form of the other forms of power" [5]. Generally, Taboo words can be categorized into several categories, such as bodily excretions, death and disease, and sex, based on their meanings; within those types of S-T words, a lot of them have meanings of sexism that can be defined as S-T words biased against females and favors males [6].

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English sexist S-T words can be classified as: words imply that the woman is promiscuous or sexually loose (e.g., slut, whore). Suggest a woman is homosexual or masculine (e.g., dyke). A sexual object (e.g., pu**y, c**t). The woman mistreats others (e.g., bitch) [7,8,9]. This corresponds with Deming Liao's research of Chinese swearwords; he points out that one of the significant categories of Chinese S-T words is sex-directed S-T words, which mostly refer to female sexual organs or sexual behavior [4]. Within the category of gender-directed S-T words, there is a larger set of offensive vocabulary for women than men in both Chinese and English [9,10]. This shows that sexist S-T words are not unique for a particular culture but a category common in every language and culture, which is because the whole world is generally in a patriarchal oppressive structure system [11]. When the taboo languages have been invited and be used, most societies are still considered patriarchal, which means common social cognition believes that females are physically, socially, and interpersonally oriented weaker than males. Thus, any description that differs from this common but stereotypical social concept is considered offensive, which can take the phenomena of differences in taboo words to be regarded as offensive between females and males mentioned above as examples [12].

This belittled word of women such as 'biao zi'or 'slut', is a form of materialization towards women, it reproduce and reinforce the value of inequality between men and women. These kinds of S-T words facilitate the generalized bias of 'sluts = female,' and this bias generates female visibility on a negative side and stabilizes the prejudice against women [13]. Moreover, the morphologization of biao is a form of 'gendered labels carry the stigma of female sexuality as their connotation [14]. Besides, sexist taboo words show strong misogyny not only in the swear words that are used to attack women but also used to offend men as well. The sexist taboo words that specifically refer to sexual or aggressive behavior are considered the most offensive taboo words for women, whereas labeling a man as "womanly" is regarded as the most insulting among males [12]. These phenomena are very intuitively reflected in the oppression and attacks on women through sexist taboo words. Misogyny is deeply rooted in the language system generated by patriarchal society.

On the social level, since the close association between social cognition and taboo words, taboo words play the role of reinforcing the restricting the regarded immoral or offensive social behavior. On the individual level, as most people agree, the main function of taboo words is to express emotion [3]. Thomas and Wareing claimed that language has functions in aspects of 'reference, affective, aesthetical and social [15]. The affective function directly reveals the relationship between semantic orientation and emotional expression. So, as long as sexist taboo words with misogyny are used, females will constantly be attacked by the misogyny emotion, and the harm to females in the patriarchal society will be reinforced again.

2.2. Influence of bilingualism on thinking and behavior

Bilingual's behavior and thought can be influenced by the cultural values of the language they are speaking. When speaking foreign languages, people tend to modify their behavior to act more like native speakers belong to the foreign language they are speaking [16]. This is called Cultural Accommodation in Bond and Yang's study. In their survey, Chinese-English participants tend to respond to values of Western culture when answering English questionnaires and tend to be involved in Chinese cultural values when answering Mandarin questionnaires.

When bilinguals use different languages to solve the same moral dilemma, the result possibly be different. This phenomenon is academically known as the moral foreign language effect, as bilinguals making moral decisions in a moral dilemma, using their native language might lead to a more deontological decision that is more concerned about the moral principles and emotional aspects, however using non-native language to make the decision will inversely induce moral utilitarian choices which more focusing on consequences [17].

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Many literatures have conducted in-depth discussions on this effect through different methods such as experiments and two metaregressions. We summarized the analysis of the results of various kinds of literature and found that this phenomenon happens because when using a second language, bilinguals feel less emotional and perform a weaker perceptivity of feeling the moral cognition and the cultural environment behind the language. Moreover, proficiency in a foreign language has no impact; rather, the similarity between the native language and the foreign language has an influence [18]. Needed to mention that the research about the moral foreign language effect is still improving, however, the present conclusion is adequate to demonstrate that the different languages we use can influence how we thinking because of bilinguals' different perceptivity toward the cultural background and moral cognition between the native language and non-native language.

2.3. Differences of bilinguals on using taboo words in L1 and L2

Kai Huang and Elena Nicoladis studied the emotional response of Canadian French-English bilinguals to words in both languages, including taboo words. Found that English taboo words evoke a higher galvanic skin response (GSR) instead of first-language taboo words, which indicates higher emotional arousal. As the study took place in a majority-English community, daily experience with taboo words of participants might cause a greater emotional response. This supports that emotional-laden contexts of language acquisition is connected with the high emotional response to taboo words rather than factors like age of acquisition or contents of acquisition [19].

Another research by Catherine L. Harris linked socio-cultural expectation with the preference of Chinese-English Bilinguals for L2 emotional expressions such as anger, taboo phrases, and confidences/intimacies [20]. According to their pilot study, "Interviewees attributed this to the greater social constraints in Chinese culture to minimize emotional expression." For example, "wo ai ni" is considered to be a strong and serious expression in Chinese cultural convention; therefore, the limited open expression of emotion resulted in the preference for the L2 word "I love you." These academic findings would support the following discussion of how cultural background influences the use of L1 and L2 S-T words.

3. The influence of cultural background on the use of sexist taboo words among Chinese-English bilinguals

Language shows the social status and social distance of members in social interaction; this would be more obvious in S-T words due to their specialty and marginality [4]. Then, the consequent question comes out, taboo words, especially sexist taboo words, as a special category of language which closely related to the cultural background, when bilinguals use them, what will happen? Cultural background refers to a large range; however, since this research focuses on sexist S-T words, so only the part associated with sexist S-T words will be discussed.

3.1. Comparative analysis of sexism Chinese & English language

Many English and Chinese S-T words have derogatory meanings, especially towards females, and there are usually no corresponding words towards males for those gender-directed S-T words. Examples of this category are: bitch, whore, slut, street girl, etc. [21]. The female-directed S-T words are embodied with the gender role that males and females are expected to follow [10]. They are used as a tool to strengthen the gender stereotype; people who are contrary to the gender role would be punished through those S-T words [8]. Women are expected to be chaste in both traditional Chinese & English culture. Therefore, the word 'whore' or 'biao zi' is used as swearing towards women.

According to ancient Chinese superstition, women are born with inferiority and sin [22]. Sexual longings of women are doubly taboo [23]. As mentioned, most of Chinese sex-directed S-T words

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2024.23278

are related to female sexual organ or sexual behavior. Liao attributes the preference of women in sex-directed Chinese S-T words to 5 reasons: reproduction worship, the taboo nature of sex, satisfaction of sexual fantasy, misogyny, and reshaping of female subordination [4]. Although the traditional values is becoming out-dated, S-T words, however, can still reflect the sexism deep in the culture.

The covert sexism [24] could first be shown through the unequal distribution of character components 'nǚ' and 'nán' (female and male). Statistically, there are 257 characters with the character component 'nǚ', 100 of them are involved with criticism of positive or negative meaning. 35 of them are pejorative, and 18 of them have mixed meanings. While only 3 Chinese characters have character components of 'nan', 2 of them are neutral words, and 1 of them still conveys discrimination against females. In the aspect of swearing, gender-directed S-T words in Chinese directly includes characters related to females or words of elder females in the family like 'ta ma de,ta nai nai de'(fuck), 'cao ni ma'(fuck your mother), 'biao zi'(slut) [22].

In Mandarin, character components generated from single component characters like, has an ideographic function of the implication of the meaning of characters. Hence, the existence of the character component of 'nǚ' (female) implies meanings associated with woman or feminity[25]. As the theory of symbolic violence [26] claims, the preference of female sexuality, especially words related to the mother, reflects the structure of power of traditional Chinese society. Filial duty is one of the core content of Chinese culture; among the traditional Chinese family structure, the father, the male immediate family member, is considered to be the symbol of absolute power under the patriarchal ideology. By using words like 'gan' or 'cao'(fuck) that represent a form of sexual domination on women [5], speakers could make themselves the father of others in the form of swearing, thus, put themselves at the position of dominator [4]. This form of swearing would be more effective in Chinese culture due to the significant role of filial duty.

3.2. Comparative analysis of Chinese & English culture background

Different languages represent different cultural backgrounds of their origin country. Since this research restricts the bilinguals range into Chinese-English bilinguals who take Chinese as the native language and English as the second language, the cultural background of China and English-speaking countries will be discussed in the following research.

Marry Besemeres pointed out that culture has more impact on language than verbal factors [26]. Nonverbal means of expression, such as those related to culture, are part of a language. The way of expressing emotion in Asian and Western countries is significantly different [26,27]. A typical example could be Zhengdao Ye. As a Chinese scholar who immigrated to Australia, Ye noticed the huge difference between Chinese and Australian Culture and summarized the nature of expression in Chinese culture as 'subtle, implicit and without words'. As she wrote, Chinese people avoid verbal expressions of inner emotion while emphasis on physical action [28]. In contrast, frequent verbal declarations of love are the norm in Western cultures, especially in North America [29,30].

Ye wrote about her life in Australia that its common hearing Australians saying 'I love you' in daily conversation, while she and her parent never said this to each other [28]. Besides, a research linked socio-cultural expectation with the preference of Chinese-English Bilinguals on L2 emotional expressions such as anger, taboo phrases, and confidences/intimacies [20]. According to their pilot study, "Interviewees attributed this to the greater social constraints in Chinese culture to minimize emotional expression." For example, "wo ai ni" is reported to be a strong and serious expression in Chinese cultural conventions. Therefore, the limited open expression of emotion resulted in the preference for the L2 word "I love you."

Ways of expressing the emotion of love could reflect different display rules that differ between Chinese and Western cultures. Many Asian cultures emphasise attending to others, fitting in, and

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2024.23278

harmonious interdependence with them, similar to the collectivist culture defined by Triandis, where interpersonal relationship is highly emphasized [31]. While this connection among individuals is not commonly emphasized in American culture, in contrast, individual independence is highly valued and maintained by attending to, discovering, and expressing people's unique inner attributes [27], which corresponds with Triandis's definition of individualism. In other words, Chinese-English bilinguals are encouraged more to express their emotion when speaking their L2 on the general effect of Western culture.

Moreover, Language structure could also be considered to be a factor: Chinese culture and other Asian cultures like Japanese culture are considered high-context cultures [32], which means that speakers assume a shared context when communicating and interacting with others, which reduces the necessity for fully transparent verbal statements [33]. Western culture, especially the U.S. culture, as one of the representative English-speaking cultures in the world, is the lowest context culture. This means messages need to be conveyed in a more direct and clear way when speaking English. For Chinese-English bilinguals, information that can only be 'sensed' but can not be explained in Chinese culture has to be expressed out loud when communicating using English.

Different writing systems can also affect the thinking frame of speakers. The Chinese writing system is pictographic, which means words are a direct representation of reality. Chinese speakers tend to use imaginal thinking when forming their language [34]. Therefore, the offensive meaning of S-T words seems to be more direct and intuitive in the Chinese language. On the other hand, in the alphabetical English writing system, information is conveyed by abstract logical analysis. Words are abstract representations of reality; those non-pictographic words are considered less direct when expressing meaning. For Chinese-English bilinguals that have Chinese as their L1, their internalized implicit nature of Chinese culture makes them avoid using Chinese sexist S-T words since the verbal sexist meaning is perceived to be stronger and more aggressive, and results in a larger negative effect on social harmony.

Since sexual behavior and sexual organs are involved in most of sexist S-T words, the attitude towards sex in each culture becomes an ineluctable topic to discuss. Previous studies show that Asians have more conservative sexual attitudes than their Hispanic and Euro-American peers [35]. Sex, including sexual organs or sexual behavior, is traditionally taboo in both Chinese and English culture, while the taboo meaning of sex is stronger in Chinese culture due to its characteristic of being 'subtle, implicit, and without words' [28]. According to the cultural accommodation theory, the stronger sexual stigma in Chinese culture is reflected in bilinguals' thinking frames; then, the avoidance of sexist S-T words is naturally shown when speaking Chinese.

4. Conclusions

At the beginning of this study, the definitions of taboo words and sexual taboo words are confirmed, and the essence of the patriarchal cultural background behind the phenomenon is discovered. Meanwhile, by summarizing the research on the moral effects of foreign languages, it was concluded that bilingualism will affect cognition and moral judgment. In addition, the research group gathered research on bilingualism and used analysis of the differences in users' reactions when using different languages to support the previous conclusion that bilingualism affects users' thinking and decisions, providing scientific evidence. Finally, by deeply exploring the impact of cultural background on taboo language, it could be concluded that, as discussed in Section 1, offensive language towards women is common in both cultures. The difference in the speaker's reactions is mainly due to the differences in cultural backgrounds between China and Western culture in terms of direct expression of personal emotions. Taboo words with the same semantics may have different levels of offense in the cultural backgrounds behind different languages.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2024.23278

Back to the situation that the study discusses, many bilingual speakers of Chinese and English choose to use English S-T words, including sexist words, when expressing strong emotion. After analyzing this phenomenon in the aspect of gender-directed S-T words, it is speculated that this is because the cultural background associated with English is more open to the direct expression of emotions, and the environment of individual liberalism is more supportive of individuals expressing their own ideas and emotions, while China has emphasized harmony since ancient times and taken implicit expression as the mainstream, so when directly using taboo words that carry strong offensive emotions, there will be a conflict with the cultural atmosphere of the language. Sections 1 and 4 in the literature review section provide good evidence to support our inference. Section 1 mentioned that from the perspective of the formation of taboo words, taboo words are a reflection of social concepts and cultural background, while section 4 has a more in-depth and detailed discussion of the cultural background of Chinese and English, such as the implicitness of Chinese culture and the freedom of American culture.

However, there are some limitations of this research that need to be improved. First, researchers did not design experiments or questionnaires to collect data to verify the inferences, but only relied on past research conclusions to infer. In the future, scientific methods are needed in order to get statistical data to prove the inferences made in this study. During the process of paper collection, we found that some researchers argue that cultural differences might not be as systematic and obvious as most cross-cultural studies assume [36]. This leads to a consideration that the concept of cultural background itself needs to be verified to some extent. Lastly, factors such as gender and age associated with culture could be added in to the research in order to make the study more comprehensive.

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