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Taboo word fluency and knowledge of slurs and general pejoratives: deconstructing the poverty-of-vocabulary myth

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ABSTRACT

A folk assumption about colloquial speech is that taboo words are used because speakers cannot find better words with which to express themselves: because speakers lack vocabulary. A competing possibility is that fluency is fluency regardless of subject matter—that there is no reason to propose a difference in lexicon size and ease of access for taboo as opposed to emotionally-neutral words. In order to test these hypotheses, we compared general verbal fluency via the Controlled Oral Word Association Test (COWAT) with taboo word fluency and animal word fluency in spoken and written formats. Both formats produced positive correlations between COWAT fluency, animal fluency, and taboo word fluency, supporting the fluency-is-fluency hypothesis. In each study, a set of 10 taboo words accounted for 55–60% of all taboo word data. Expressives were generated at higher rates than slurs. There was little sex-related variability in taboo word generation, and, consistent with findings that do not show a sex difference in taboo lexicon size, no overall sex difference in taboo word generation was obtained. Taboo fluency was positively correlated with the Big Five personality traits neuroticism and openness and negatively correlated with agreeableness and conscientiousness. Overall the findings suggest that, with the exception of female-sex-related slurs, taboo expressives and general pejoratives comprise the core of the category of taboo words while slurs tend to occupy the periphery, and the ability to generate taboo language is not an index of overall language poverty.

We cannot help but judge others on the basis of their speech. Unfortunately, when it comes to taboo language, it is a common assumption that people who swear frequently are lazy, do not have an adequate vocabulary, lack education, or simply cannot control themselves (Dumas and Lighter, 1978; Jay, 2000; O'Connor, 2000). As O'Connor describes taboo word use: "It's the sign of a weak vocabulary" (p. 80).

Perhaps because of the nature of the topic, the poverty-of-vocabulary (POV) assumption is not explicitly addressed in scholarly literature, though it abounds elsewhere (such as on blogs and other internet fora, *e.g.*, Schulten, 2010). For one thing, in scholarly literature, there is some basic ambiguity about how to conceptualize taboo language (*i.e.*, ethnic-racial-gender slurs, profanity, blasphemy, expletives, obscenity, insults, swear words, curse words, dirty words, name calling, or scatology). For example, Pinker (1994) concluded that swearing did not constitute "genuine" language, while others (*e.g.*, Jay, 2009) have argued that taboo words are legitimate lexical items because they obey syntactic and semantic rules and are used

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for a variety of purposes (for contextually-determined taboo language use see, *e.g.*, Dewaele, 2011; Jay, 1992, 2000, 2003, 2009; Jay and Janschewitz, 2007, 2008; Jay and Jay, 2013; Stephens et al., 2009). For example, Jay (1992) decomposes observational spoken frequency data for taboo words according to their parts of speech or case roles, demonstrating that while a given taboo word can be used in many ways, connotative or emotional meaning is frequently at the heart of a taboo word's meaning and/or use. Along these lines, some linguists and philosophers of language make the distinction between taboo expressives (*e.g., fuck*), that express heightened emotional states (see Potts, 2007), general pejoratives (*e.g., fucker*), whose meaning is connotative but are person-directed, and slurs (*e.g., slut*), which have both expressive and (derogatory) descriptive elements (Croom, 2011). Inasmuch as slurs are sensitive to features of their targets (*e.g.,* sexual or racial features as in *slut* or *chink*), they are particularly robust examples of context-sensitive taboo words, and recent literature (Croom, 2011, 2013, 2014a, 2014b) has shown that slurs can be distinguished from descriptive expressions (*e.g.*, *African*) as well as expressive expressions (*e.g.*, *ouch!*) or general pejoratives. Fluent use of slurs, therefore, relies on knowledge of both descriptive and expressive appropriateness.

Studies of taboo language use have identified variables that may predict swearing at the individual level, although more fine-grained analysis (of *e.g.,* variables that would predict use of general pejoratives versus use of slurs) has not yet been done. Rather, "swearing" in general is associated with certain personality and psychological variables. For example, religiosity and sexual anxiety are negatively correlated with swearing (Jay, 2009) as are the personality traits agreeableness and conscientiousness from the Big Five Inventory (BFI; John et al., 2008; Mehl et al., 2006). The BFI is a personality inventory that taps five personality factors (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism) that most psychologists agree are universal, and these traits have been used in psychological research to predict peoples' behaviors and attitudes in different contexts. BFI traits extraversion and neuroticism are positively correlated with swearing (the latter in males; Fast and Funder, 2008), as is Type A personality, which is characterized by impatience, competitiveness, and hostility (Jay, 2009).

Additionally, we may ask how speakers who use taboo language are perceived by others. Much of the research in this area suggests that taboo language use is perceived negatively (although this depends on context and speaker–listener relationship, see *e.g.*, Abrahams, 1962; Fussell, 1989). For example, Mulac (1976) found that speakers who used profanity were rated lower on socio-intellectual status than speakers who were restrained. Heubusch and Horan (1977) reported that counselors who used profanity were judged to be less effective and less satisfying than those who did not use profanity. Baseheart and Cox (1993) found that police who used profanity during a traffic stop were perceived as being less friendly and less just than police officers who did not use profanity. The use of slurs in particular is perceived very negatively; this kind of taboo language is often considered a form of threatening or hate speech (Croom, 2011).

Another negative assumption about swearing is that it is an undesirable alternative to using nontaboo words, the result of a limited vocabulary. Though widely held, the POV view is inconsistent with language research in several ways. First, the assumption that people say taboo words because they have an impoverished vocabulary implies that people say taboo words when lexical access fails. Speech production research (Erard, 2007; Jay, 2003; Levelt, 1989), however, shows that when speakers get stuck, they hesitate, repair mistakes, or utter expressions such as "er" or "um," but do not simply spit out taboo words. Second, recording studies have demonstrated that taboo word use is relatively common among college students (Mehl and Pennebaker, 2003; Mehl et al., 2007), and this population has higher-than-average verbal abilities which selectively qualify them for admission. Finally, the POV view assumes that nontaboo words can achieve the same degree of emotional expression as can taboo words. However, while they can obey grammatical rules like other language, taboo words *are* special in terms of the emotional intensity they deliver—this has been repeatedly demonstrated through subjective rating (Janschewitz, 2008) and biological measures (Jay et al., 2005; LaBar and Phelps, 1998). Thus, while one could argue that nontaboo words, with the possible exception of slurs, allow for more nuanced expression, it does not follow that taboo word use is an indicator of impoverished vocabulary. Rather, taboo language use accomplishes something else entirely: intense and succinct—and sometimes very directed—emotional expression.

At its core the POV argument centers on verbal fluency. Verbal fluency is the hallmark of intellectual acumen; the more words one knows and uses, the greater one's verbal prowess or intelligence. One method for measuring verbal fluency is the Controlled Oral Word Association Test (COWAT; Loonstra et al., 2001). The COWAT prompts participants to say words that begin with given letters (*e.g.,* F, A, or S), and the total number of words generated is summed into a fluency score. Loonstra et al. (2001) reported fluency metanorms across age, education and sex by calculating aggregate scores from numerous fluency studies. They found women generated more words on FAS tasks than did men. Individual differences have also been found based on age, education, and personality traits (Barry et al., 2008; Haugrud et al., 2010; Sutin et al., 2011).

So far measures of verbal abilities have not considered taboo words, though this line of investigation bears directly on the assumptions we commonly make about what taboo words are and who uses them. The purpose of the present set of studies was therefore to measure taboo word fluency and relate this to traditional verbal fluency measured by the COWAT. The POV view predicts a negative correlation between verbal fluency and taboo fluency, while a "fluency-is-fluency" view predicts a positive correlation between the types of fluency—if a person is verbally adept, this should extend across multiple language areas.

In addition to the COWAT as a comparison to taboo fluency, the fluency prompt "animals" was used to control for a possible category effect (as in Jay et al., 2005). The category effect in word generation is that more words tend to be generated from categories than non-categories (Troyer et al., 1997). Taboo words can be thought of as forming their own category, although arguably the basis for their coherence has to do with their connotative and emotional properties, rather than their denotative meaning. In contrast, "words that begin with F" do not form a semantic category, but "animals" forms a coherent semantic category based on denotative meaning. Incorporating both non-category and well-defined-category prompts allowed us to speculate on the size and coherence of the taboo word category. We expected no difference between the number of taboo and