

A Sociolinguistic Study of Linguistic Taboos of Death and Their Euphemistic Expressions among Bale Oromo

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ABSTRACT

This study describes a sociolinguistic study of the linguistic taboos of death and their corresponding euphemistic expressions among the Bale Oromo. To conduct the study, qualitative method was employed. Sampling methods used in this study include purposive and snowball sampling. The main instruments of data collection were focus group discussion and observation. The framework of the study was a pragmatic approach to euphemism and taboo which mainly includes euphemism to context of situation and politeness theory. The data were analyzed and interpreted based on the given framework. The findings of the study revealed that in daily communication, the Oromo society of the research areas is highly intertwined with social taboos of death. When the expressions of death taboos are wrongly used out of their context, in addition to creating an embarrassment, it is also considered as violating the social norm which may lead to offense or conflict. Due to this, they prohibit uttering taboo words or expressions related to death through euphemism. Besides, using the euphemistic expressions of an adult death for child and vice versa is taboo by itself. Therefore, the Oromo society of the study area is obliged to use euphemistic expressions according to the age of the deceased person to be mild, roundabout, polite, inoffensive, agreeable, to make taboo words related to death comparatively favorable meaning or less unpleasant association whereas the substituted linguistic taboos of death are characterized as harsh, painful, unpleasant, offensive, or frightening. To do this, they use euphemistic expression's strategy which is more metaphorical. Finally, to minimize problems encountered by the linguistic taboos of death and euphemism, further research must be conducted by concerned bodies.

KEYWORDS: linguistic taboos, death taboo, euphemism, euphemism strategy

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I. INTRODUCTION

1.1. THE PEOPLE AND THE LANGUAGE

The Oromo people are a native African ethnic group found in Ethiopia and to a smaller extent in Kenya and Somalia. Gragg (1982:xiii) reports "the Oromo live over a large area stretching from close to the Sudan border in the West, through Addis Ababa, and beyond Harar in the east, from the northern Kenya in the South and east of Rift Valley to Wollo in the north". In line with this, Kebede (2009:1) says in Ethiopia, the Oromo people live in an area extending from Tigray (Raya) in the north to Kenya in the south (Waata), and from Wollega in the west to Hararge in the east with Addis Ababa in the middle.

The Oromo language (self-name *AfaanOromoo*) is one of the languages of the East Lowland Cushitic within the Cushitic family of the Afro-Asiatic Phylum (Baye, 1986:8). It is one of the major Ethiopian languages. According to Gadaa (1988:9) and Mahdi Hamid Mude (1995: xi), *AfaanOromoo* is the third most widely spoken language in Africa after Arabic and Hausa. According to Kebede (2009) in the present day Ethiopia, *AfaanOromoo* is spoken by about 40% of the population and is used as a language of inter-group communication in several parts of the country.

Feda (2015:7) recently classified dialects of Afan Oromo into six clusters, Western (Wollega, Illubabor and Jimma), Central (Tuulama, or Shewa), Northern (Rayya and Wollo), Southern (Borana and Guji), Southeastern (Arsi and Bale) and Eastern (Harar). However, the main purpose of the current study is not to discuss the classification of Oromo dialects in detail. But it is just an attempt to show that Bale Oromo is categorized under Southeastern dialect speaker. The current research has focused on the Oromo society who lives in Oromia Regional State: Bale zone.

1.2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Language is a means to transfer information and ideas containing meaning or vital messages about life, character and personality (Helmi, 2008:12). The meaning of any discourse always depends on how people try to connect it to contextual information. It means that true meaning often lies not in the actual words uttered or

written, but in the complexity of social knowledge. Therefore, “Language is not simply a means of communicating information; it establishes and maintains the relationship of the society” (Babou-Sekkal, 2012:17). Therefore, “language is deep rooted in the culture of its people since it reflects their norms and taboos” (Ghounane, 2013:18). Consequently, speakers do not randomly choose the forms and the styles to use language. They bear in mind several aspects namely how close one another interlocutors, when and where the conversation takes place, and whom the interlocutors are (Sari, 2008:10). Hence, ignoring these beliefs during interaction may lead to severe assault between speakers since every individual has to behave appropriately in his/her society depending on its norms to avoid insulting, embarrassing, affecting the interlocutors’ self-esteem and judging other hearers in the negative way.

In this vein, one should note that “all languages have certain words, expressions, sentences and topics which are banned to be uttered or discussed in public. This language or words are called taboos” (Ghounane, 2013:19). Sari (2008:10) called these taboo words ‘dangerous words’ which is well known as ‘taboo or dysphemism’. To the same vein, among the society of Bale Oromo, there are linguistic taboos of death which they ban to speak in public and euphemize them through different strategies. This study was focused on this topic and other related issues. According to Sari (2008:10), to overcome the effect of these taboo words, the speaker may conceal the truth by avoiding the dangerous or offensivewords.

According to Wardhaugh (1986:239), “ linguistic taboo is the prohibition or an avoidance in any society of behavior believed to be harmful to its members in that it would cause them anxiety, embarrassment or shame”. So, in language, there are expressions unsuitable for use in a specific social context, and are therefore prohibited or restricted. In whatever cases, people do not directly talk about taboo words or expressions; if they compelled to talk about them, they talk in very roundabout ways. In the first case we have instances of linguistic *taboo*; in the second we have the employment of *euphemisms* to avoid mentioning about these taboo words directly (Wardhaugh 1986: 238).

1.3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The Oromo culture and language also consist of rules and norms that guide the daily businesses of the people. When these rules and norms are violated, it could result in imposition of sanctions. A linguistic taboo of death is part of the language and culture which is sensitive topic in Oromo daily communication; so it is significant to know about taboo words with their specific corresponding euphemistic strategies of using to avoid death taboos which offend someone when communication takes place.

Anderson and Hirsch (1985:79) claim that Western societies take linguistic taboo categories like sexual organs, sexual relations, religion, church, excrement, death, physically or mentally disabled, prostitution, narcotics and crime. In this study, the focus was given only for linguistic taboos of death and their euphemistic expression in the society of Oromo of Bale which has not been studied yet.

According to Allan and Burridge (1991:153) death is “a fear-based timeless taboo in which psychological, religious and social interdictions coexist”. In the Bale Oromo culture, the family in which death occurs applies certain restrictions like conversations, clothing or food. In general, the present study attempts to answer the following basic research questions:

1. What are linguistic death taboos and their euphemistic expressions used by Bale Oromo?
2. What are the factors determine taboo expressions related to death and their euphemistic among the research area?
3. What are the strategies of Oromo people of the research area use to euphemize linguistic taboo expressions related to death?

1.4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objective of this study is divided into general and specific objectives.

1.4.1. General Objective

The general objective of this study is to describe linguistic taboos related to death and their corresponding euphemistic expressions among Oromo of Bale zone of Oromia Region.

1.4.2. Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of the study are:

1. To describe linguistic death taboos and their euphemistic expressions used among the Oromo of Bale
2. To identify the factors determine taboo expressions related to death and its euphemistic expressions
3. To sort out strategies that Oromo people of the research area use to euphemize linguistic taboo expressions related to death

1.5. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is expected to encourage the interest of people to study linguistic taboos related to death and their euphemistic expressions existing in Oromo or other societies. This study also contributes important insights into applied linguistics and intercultural communication to explore the functions of euphemism and concepts of the sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic aspects of the use of euphemism in contact situations from both native and non-native speakers' perspectives.

1.6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This part includes research design, data source, sampling techniques, and instruments of data collection.

1.6.1. Research Design

To conduct this research, descriptive qualitative method is employed. Descriptive qualitative method is a better method to be used in order to collect data to specify, delineate, or describe naturally occurring phenomena without experimental manipulation (Seliger and Shohamy (1989). In essence, qualitative research is oriented toward the search for meanings, that is, the interpretation and meanings people give to events, objects, other people, and situations in their environment.

1.6.2. Source of Data and Sampling Technique

The primary source of data for this study is native speakers of AfaanOromoo who live in Bale zone. To select the research area, purposive sampling technique was used. Besides, to select the participants of the study, purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used. As Creswell (2003:185), in case of qualitative research, for the purpose of deep understanding of the subject matter under study or research question, it is up to the researcher to make a decision on the research participants, sites and even the material to be used.

1.6.3. Instruments and Data collection procedures

To collect the data, the present study has used a focus group discussion and participant observation. According to Kumar (2011:156), every step of research on taboo is sensitive and difficult. In this light, he maintains that "researchers have to use a number of approaches to deal with this sensitiveness problem; but it is difficult to say which approach is best for the study of taboo."

1.7. Theoretical Framework of the Study

In the attempt of studying the linguistic taboos of death and their corresponding euphemistic expressions in Oromo, the researcher used a pragmatic approach to euphemism. Since taboo words and euphemism can be interpreted in terms of pragmatic concepts, for this study using this approach seems essential. Pragmatic approach to euphemism includes euphemism to context of situation (Leech, 1983, Allan and Burridge, 2006) and face and politeness theory (Brown and Levinson (1987).

According to Leech (2014:30), pragmatics generally aims to explain phenomena of language use in context, especially contextually determined interpersonal meanings. One prominent theme here is the issue of indirectness: of accounting for the commonly indirect relation between what people say and how their utterances are (meant to be) interpreted. To this, we may add the need to explain why certain forms of expression (and their associated meanings) are to a greater or lesser extent favored and others disfavored or avoided (in our case taboo words and euphemism).

In linguistics, politeness is the act of using polite speech during a conversation. Allan and Burridge (2006:33) wrote about politeness and face maintenance which are represented by using euphemism. They pointed out euphemism is employed to protect the speaker from being embarrassed or ill thought of and at the same time to protect the hearer or any third party from any expected offence. This reinforces the speaker for being polite. According to them, politeness is linked to context, place and time which are inoffensive and at best pleasing to an audience (Allan and Burridge, 2006:30).

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Death is inevitable, but is a taboo in human life and social norm. It signifies termination of life and the final destination of its journey. It is a gate of exit from one life and entry into the other everlasting one. It is a good example of a mystery, since it is a phenomenon of which none of the living has any direct knowledge. In all societies and almost all languages, death is the most sensitive and fearful subject that people try to avoid mentioning. Like other societies, Oromo society has traditionally felt reluctant to deal with the topic of death using straightforward expressions. They prefer not to speak freely about death. This is a symptomatic of the overall discomfort with the subject of death as a whole. However, there are communicative situations in which one cannot evade the notion of death. In this case, language users try to soften the effect of what they wish to communicate. They deliberately avoid the embarrassing expressions of death and replace them with more moderate ones. To this end, they resort to soft words and expressions which mitigate the adverse connotations of the words related to death.

The Oromo people the research area tend not to mention the word ‘death’ itself so overtly. It is a depressing, but ‘unavoidable’ occurrence and, deprives us from our wishes and our hopes so abruptly.

To euphemize taboo words related to death, the people of the research area uses different strategies to smooth the harsh words. In line with this, Yasser and Yeli (2012) stated the valid reasons for the prevalence of death related euphemisms as follows: (1) Avoidance of the taboo topic of death. The attitudes towards language consider taboos in a speech community are extremely strong, and its violations may be sanctioned by imputations of immorality, social ostracism, and even illness or death (2) Avoidance of embarrassment i.e., people in general cannot mention or refer to death directly without embarrassment. To avoid such embarrassment, death related euphemisms naturally sets in (3) Avoidance of unpleasant feelings i.e., the word death arouses unpleasant in all societies. Therefore, a wide variety of death related euphemisms which replace death related words and expressions in some other terms) and (4) providing softening effect (i.e., death euphemism softens the harsh and sensitive reality of death).

III. DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

According to the discussants’ information of the research areas, culturally, it is considered that the use of the word ‘death’ would bring death and misfortune. This notion becomes a common belief that holds ‘death’ as a taboo issue in this society. This notion finally causes the invention and use of numerous euphemisms for ‘death’ and other related issues of it.

3.1. The linguistic taboos of death and their Euphemistic expressions

Even though death is a very shocking event, people take care of their speeches regarding death taboo and things related to it. Consequently, to avoid death related taboo expressions, the Oromo people of the research area use different strategies of euphemistic expressions to make their communication softer and polite. According to participants’ justification, taboo words related to death and their euphemistic expressions differ depending on age of the deceased person and causes of the death.

3.1.1. Ways of expressing death based on age

In AfaanOromoo, saying the word *du?e* ‘died’ to express death is inappropriate. Due to its impoliteness it annoys the hearers. However, people use it to express the animal death rather than human death. According to the respondents’ elaboration, I found that Bale Oromo use euphemistic expressions to avoid taboo words based on the age of the deceased person. The euphemistic expressions which the Oromo people of the research area use for child, youth and adult are guided by social contexts of particular area. If somebody expresses death out of socially accepted ways, the family of the deceased person or other hearers may be offended by the speaker impoliteness. The data of this research were presented by four levels. The first level is AfaanOromoo data, the second level is glossing, the third level is the literal translation and fourth level is the idiomatic translation. However, there were the data only presented by three levels when the literal and idiomatic translations have similar interpretation.

3.1.1.1. Euphemisms for adult’s death

Adults are daily passing away from this world as a result of different factors. To express adult’s death, Oromo people avoid impolite expressions and use polite ones. In Bale Oromo, there is no variation of the euphemistic expressions between an adult’s and youth’s death; they use identical expressions in (1) may be due to sometimes people consider youth as an adult. For example, expressing adult’s death by the direct expression *abalu-tudu?-e* ‘Mr. X has died’ is a taboo. Instead, the Bale Oromo prefer using the following euphemistic expressions:

(1)

a. *amirii¹-n ta?-e*
Command-NOM happen-3SM: PFV

‘Lit².the final command happend.’

‘He/she passed away.’

b. *ñaaata diis-e/t³-e*
food stop-3SM: PFV/3SF-PFV

‘Lit.he/she stopped eating food.’

‘He/she passed away.’

¹The term *amirii* is originally from Arabic, meaning ‘command.

² The third level glossing line provided for literal translation.

³ In AfaanOromoo, **-t** may also show **2SM/F** (i.eati/išeen/inniñaaatadiis-t-e)

- c. *areera*⁴*unuu diis-e/t-e*
milk:INF stop-3SM: PFV/3SF-PFV
'Lit. He/she stopped sipping milk.'
'He/she passed away.'
- d. *godaan-e/t-e*
migrate-3SM: PFV/3SF-PFV
'Lit.he/she migrated.'
'He/she passed away.'
- e. *garadugaa deem-e/t-e*
to truth go-3SM: PFV/3SF-PFV
'Lit.he/she went to the truth.'
'He/she passed away.'
- f. *bok'ot-e/t-e*
rest-3SM: PFV/3SF-PFV
'Lit. He/she took a rest.'
'He/she passed away.'

The expression in (1a) is borrowed from Arabic language and refers to the decision that God has taken towards the dead person. This metaphoric expression is common in Bale Oromo to express death. The expression also shows that death is inevitable action which is determined only by God and not by the will of someone else. It also implies that death is an action which everybody accepts at the end of life. Besides, Bale Oromo also euphemize death by metaphoric expressions in (1b). Because, human beings eat food to live; otherwise he/she can't be alive. The literal meaning in (1b) shows the one who refuses to eat food due to illness or dissatisfaction, but in this context, it expresses the adult's death. As we know when someone is sick he/she cannot eat food as usual; that means he/she eats a little amount of food. However, when he/she died, he/she completely gives up eating.

They also interchangeably use the expression in (1c) to refer to an old man or woman who stopped drinking milk which he/she drinks regularly. Likewise a new baby comes to this world primarily begins life with the taste of milk, and depart also through that. Thus, a person who approaches death prefers drinking milk to eating food. However, to stop drinking milk is the sign of end of life because it is the last option for the treatment of a person. Besides, Bale Oromo use the metaphoric expression in (1d) to express death, because migration indicates the separation of people from their birth place. However, people do not migrate easily from their local areas to another except in the cases of the economic, social, political or environmental calamities. Whatever it is, they move to somewhere for a better quality of life. Similar to this, when someone dies, it is considered as he/she migrates from miserable life of this world to the heaven. This expression is more frequently used by Christian and Muslim Oromos; because, they believe in the life after death. Furthermore, they use the expression in (1e) which has the nearest meaning with *godaane*. In this sentence, the term *dugaa* refers to 'God' who always speaks truth; this means, in this world, people do not speak truth to one another and cheat his/her friends, family, neighbor and so on. Thus, when someone dies, they consider as he/he departs from the falsely world to the truth one. To some extent, this expression minimizes the tension that people have towards going to hell, which is the place of endless suffering. According to the informants', this world is the place where truth is hidden or disrespected and lies are magnified; so, when somebody dies, he/she departs from this corrupted world to the place where truth exists.

In Oromo society of the research area, it is heard when they express the deceased person saying *bok'ote* as in (1f). Culturally, in this people, *duutiifihirribnihangafaafik'ut'usuuda* when translated to English 'death and sleep are the elder and the younger'. From this statement we can understand that people metaphorize death with sleep; while they sometimes consider *hirriba* 'sleep' as a rest. On the other hand, if someone says *bok'očuunbarbaada* 'I want to take a rest', it does not represent that he wants to die. In Bale Oromo, the expression in (1e) is used less frequently than the other expressions listed in (1a-e).

3.1.1.2. Euphemism expressions for child Death

As described above, we have seen that Bale Oromo use euphemistic expressions to express adult's death. Similarly, they use different euphemisms to express child's death. According to the informants' explanation, Bale Oromo use the expressions in (2):

(2)

- a. *deebi?-t-e[deebite]* (both male and female child is referred to by feminine)

⁴*areeraa* is the actual reference of the word to milk from which butter is extracted but generally used for 'milk'

return-3SF-PFV

‘Lit. she returned.’

‘He/she passed away.’

b. *Waak’-ni jaallat-e*

God-NOMlove -3SM: PFV

‘Lit. God loved him/her.’

‘Passed away.’

c. *hammaat-t-e*

peril-3SF-PFV

‘Lit. he/she became peril.’

‘Passed away.’

d. *k’abaa hank’-at-t-e*

handlefail toreach-MD-3SF-PFV

‘Lit. she failed to reach the development stage to be embraced.’

‘Sh passed away.’

e. *bad-t-e [badde]*

disappear-3SF-PFV

‘Lit. she disappeared.’

‘She passed away.’

f. *karaa-ittideebi?-t-e [karaattideebite]*

Road-LOC return-3SF-PFV

‘Lit. she returned back on the way.’

‘She passed away.’

According to the informants’ explanation, Bale Oromo use the metaphoric expression in (2a) refers to the child that came to this world and went back soon to her creator without accomplishing something in this world. To express child’s death they use feminine gender either male or female. So, here one would not be confused because of the expressions given as female gender. Sometimes, Bale Oromo also use the expression in (2b) to express child’s death which is a hyperbole expression to refer to how much God loved and hurried to pick up the child from the family to Himself. On the other hand, this expression has a power to strengthen the child’s family by referring that the child was taken by God not by evil spirit. Believing this, they may reduce their grief thinking that the child exists near God. Bale Oromo also interchangeably use the metaphoric expression in (2c) to express the periled child being separated from the family’s love rather than staying longer with them.

Bale Oromo use the euphemistic expressions depending on the cause of child’s death. For example, if the cause of the death is miscarriage, they will use the most common metaphoric euphemistic expression in (2d) which refers to mother’s misfortune of missing or failing to embrace her child. They use the euphemistic expression in (2d) to express as the mother missed embracing and affection of her child, due to the untimely death. Also they use the metaphoric expressions in (2e) which refers to the child’s disappearance due to death. They also use the euphemistic expression in (2f) to refer to the started journey of a child which could not proceed.

We have to understand that the Oromo of the research areas do not use similar euphemistic expressions for a child which has died as soon as delivered and which died after a few months/years. Therefore, the euphemistic expression they use for miscarried child is different from the child who was delivered on time, and then died soon after birth. On the other hand, if somebody uses the expressions of child’s death to express adult’s and youth’s death, it is considered as taboo. From this explanation we can conclude that even if we euphemized taboo expressions and cannot use them in appropriate context, they are considered as taboo. Therefore, euphemizing taboo words related to death and using in inappropriate context does not make our communication polite.

IV. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

As the study has found out, age plays a significant role to avoid linguistic taboo of death. As it has been explained before, the expressions that we use to euphemize linguistic death taboos are differed depending on the age of the deceased person. Thus, in the study area, to express the death of a child and an adult, people use different expressions according to age of the person. The euphemistic expressions which are appropriate to refer to adult’s death are taboo if we use to express child’s or youth’s death, and vice versa. In this regard, one might confirm that death is a universal topic as well as culture specific since each society has its own beliefs.

The Oromo people of the research areas employ euphemistic expressions to lessen or avoid tabooed words/expressions related to death in order not to offend the speaker and hearer. Indeed, they avoid taboos and

tend to replace them with certain mechanisms. Therefore, in their daily interaction, to avoid taboos and to protect their faces and politeness they create certain strategies. Thus, euphemistic expressions offer possibilities to gain insights into cultural and psychological aspects of language use, including sensibilities, and how to communicate about these issues linguistically to minimize the risk of offence. Therefore, what also emerged from the analysis is that the use of taboos exists side by side with euphemism depending on the context of communication.

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