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## TO TABOO EVERYTHING AT ALL TIMES

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Linguistic taboo has often been approached from a socio-linguistic angle, and that is appropriate. But it is also necessary to examine linguistic taboo from a strictly linguistic angle, whether descriptive or historical, or both. I mean from an angle where we can see the place of taboo in the general economy of the language, the effect it has on its various elements, and the general principles at work. We may also be able to propose linguistic explanations in addition to accurate descriptions, and envisage general historical scenarios as well as specific reconstructions of taboo phenomena.

This area of research attracted my attention because of my previous interest in studying iconicity in Asian Expressives (Diffloth 1972, 1976, 1979). The similarity between taboo and Expressives might not be immediately evident, but in both we are dealing with something that can be called linguistic improvisation, in both we can witness the creation and use of linguistic forms which are new to the language and its speakers, and which may or may not be repeated or imitated later on; in both we are confronted with phenomena which are not due to rule-governed behaviour, but to rule-creating behaviour;<sup>1</sup> in both we see a different facet of language: instead of the usual code of rules and congealed structures, we find an on-going process of structuration, of structure in the making. For the moment, linguistic improvisation remains a somewhat uncharted area of language study, one where many theoretical questions appear in a new light, or disappear into the realm of Irrelevance. Take, for example, the notion of grammaticality: the role, if any, which such a notion might play in linguistic improvisation is very far from clear.<sup>2</sup>

In these few pages, I will not dwell upon the disturbing theoretical issues which linguistic improvisation stirs up, rather, I will document a rich and explicit taboo system found in Semai<sup>3</sup> where improvisation is evident.

But first, a few remarks about taboo in English are necessary. Consider the exclamation [ʃʃvʊt] (falling intonation), which is another way of saying "I am disappointed", "something went wrong". Native speakers will agree that this word stands for another one: [ʃʃt] (falling intonation) with the same meaning. This latter exclamation, however, is an instance of a well defined linguistic behavior, "obscurity". Because the straightforward referential meaning of these words belong to a small number of semantic domains which are considered disagreeable, obscenity is frowned upon and carefully avoided by many native speakers in a large spectrum of social contexts, while indulged in on certain other fairly well circumscribed occasions. The first exclamation, however, does not constitute an instance of obscenity but a case of what one might call "aborted obscenity": the speaker thereby

conveys the message that s/he intends to use obscenity but decides to refrain from so doing by consideration for the audience and for him-/herself. Notice the phonetic means by which this complicated message is conveyed; the word starts with the same phonetic characteristics as the obscene [ʃʃɪt], an exaggerated<sup>4</sup> fricative, but the expected sequel [...ɪt] does not materialize, the phonology soon derails, often after a few additional suspenseful milliseconds, and a different word is pronounced, "shoot", which does pertain to another obsession of the culture, but one which is considered far less objectionable.

This particular taboo mechanism might be called "phonological taboo": what is being avoided is not the immodest display of temper, or the speech act of cursing, I mean cussing, not even the indirect reference to excrements which is in fact clear to everyone involved, but simply the phonological sequence ʃ + I + t.

This sort of phonetic superstition is probably widespread around the world, but it is only one of the possible forms of linguistic taboo, and not the most fertile.

In order to find taboo mechanisms of a different, and more vivacious kind, it is instructive to pay attention to non-literate societies where the phenomenon was, after all, first noted and described - the word tabu was apparently brought back from Tonga by Captain Cook - and where it is an active process today.

We find among the Semai of Malaysia a variety of linguistic taboo which might be described as taboo on lexicalisation, as I will try to show below. But first, I must make some general remarks about Semai views on the world.

The Semai are, in their own words, "forest people" /snʔooj srak<sup>5</sup>/. The word /smaay/ is recent and not fully current. It appears to have been coined by the Temiar, their northern neighbors, and to originate in the name of a creek /teew simaay/ located in Cameron Highlands where the two groups came into contact. Reference to topography (the people of River x...) is the normal method which Malaysian forest people use for naming other groups; they do not seem to care much for larger linguistically based groupings, until one reaches the all inclusive term "forest people", which denotes an ecological niche, not an ethnic entity. The equatorial rain forest is their world and absorbing passion, while Malaysian urbanites and farmers tend to view the "jungle" as a rather hostile or haunted kind of place. As a result, much of Semai ideology, as expressed in myths, sayings, and specific rules of conduct (Diffloth, in press) concerns itself with the multitude of life forms of the forest and man's place in it.

Consistently with their dislike for ethnic divisions, the Semai prefer to dwell upon the similarities and connections between living species, including Homo Sapiens, rather than on their differences. One would be tempted to predict that the western concept of humanitarianism which places a quasi-religious value on the life of humans, would probably appear to a Semai as a blatant form of racism, or at least of childish egocentrism.

In the world of myths, the timeless past, there was/is no

clear differentiation of species; all animal life forms, and many plants, looked and behaved very much the way humans do, spoke to each other freely, intermarried, and produced offspring whose identity was nobody's concern, at least in most circumstances. And in the real present, Semais are convinced that individuals of such diverse species as, say, the cockroach, the flying squirrel (*Hylopetes lepidus*) and the pencil-tailed tree mouse (*Chiropodomys gliroides*) metamorphosize into each other during their own lifetime. It is in this context, for example, that cases of people becoming tigers, a notion which is widespread in Southeast Asia, should be understood.

The problem is, and this becomes a central preoccupation for the Semai, that people hunt and kill and eat other animals to keep alive. Semais, the men at least, hunt a great deal and have developed advanced hunting methods; thinking about a hunt, dreaming up ways of outsmarting other animals, observing their behaviour and understanding their motives, occupies them for days; hunters develop a personal bond to the game, one where familiarity breeds animosity and compassion; but the flesh they end up eating is nearly their own, and they do not talk lightly about the whole subject.

In fact Semais do not use language lightly to begin with. Naming, in particular, is a very delicate matter, as it is in Southeast Asia generally. This applies not only to calling people in the proper fashion or to choosing a fitting anaphoric device, but also to specifying animals or plants one wants to talk about.

There is linguistic evidence<sup>6</sup> that Semais consider any kind of naming as a lesser form of violence, something to be eschewed with the same care one avoids /luk krkbaak/ "laughing at butterflies", one of their favorite understatements for "harassment".

Given the hunter's dilemma and this sensitivity to using names, it is to be expected that animal names will be used by Semais, if at all, with a great deal of diplomatic inventiveness. Evidence for this appears very clearly in the language itself: for every animal species which is possibly eaten, and this includes practically the entire named fauna, insects excepted, there are long, open-ended sets of names. The Semai themselves classify these names into three broad categories: /muh brnɔɔr/ "name which-is-good"<sup>8</sup> /muh cnacəəʔ/ "name which-disgraces"<sup>9</sup> and /muh krndɛy/ "name by-which-one-causes-someone-not-to-know".<sup>10</sup>

The first category, /muh brnɔɔr/ contains only one item per named species, one could therefore call it the real name.<sup>11</sup> This is the name which is tabooed; it would be undiplomatic to use it in a large number of circumstances, for example, most emphatically, when one is eating the flesh of the animal, but also when one is preparing it, hunting it, or even thinking about hunting it, in which cases it would certainly bring about /trlaac/ "retaliation" from one of the animal species, /ʔɨkuuʔ/, a mythical heavenly bear, usually in the form of thundersqualls<sup>12</sup>. It would also be indelicate to use the real name in case some other person in the area is doing any of the above activities, and, more generally

when there are uneasy moments in the settlement, such as a pregnancy, a sickness, etc... The list is not yet closed, and is already so inclusive as it stands, and so ill-defined, that, to be on the safe side, Semais refrain from using real names at almost all times (Diffloth, in press).<sup>13</sup>

Members of the other two categories of names are used to replace the real name. Some Semais include these two categories under a single term, /muh krmwuh/ "name with-which-to-name"<sup>14</sup> but the two have different functions, as the terms imply. These "names with-which-to-name" are often used with the word /bah/ prefixed, whose literal meaning is "Father's younger brother" but whose extended meaning is comparable to English "Mr.".

In the disgracing names category, /muh ncaəə?/, we find words which generally make fun of the appearance, the gait, the smell, the behavior of the particular animal, or allude to it in some disrespectful way.<sup>15</sup> Many of these names are Expressives; e.g. /mɔ̃ mntĩp / "dirty eyes" for the Banded-leaf monkey (*Presbytis melalophos*). Needless to say, it is impossible to list all the /muh ncaəə?/ even for one species: inventiveness is much appreciated here, not only semantically, but even phonologically, since the forms of Expressives constitute an open-ended system, and they are, in a sense, constantly created anew.

In the secret names category, /muh krndəy/, by far the larger, we find words or expressions which are purposefully obscure, so as to cause the animal not to know that he is being named. Here, improvisation is more conceptual and syntactic: a typical food of the animal can serve as a name, e.g. /bah prah/ "Mr. Perah fruit (*Elateriospermum tapos*)" for the Long-tailed giant rat (*Rattus sabanus*); or features of its habitat, e.g. "Mr. cave" for the mountain goat, /bah guul/ "Mr. mortar" for the Lesser gymnure (*Hylomys suillus*) because it is known to sleep in discarded mortars; or behavior traits, e.g. /bah babɔ̃?/ "Mr. cling-to mother" for the Flying lemur (*Cynocephalus variegatus*), because of the conspicuous way it transports its young (Medway, 1969), /bah wit/ "Mr. erase-its-tracks" for the Malayan pangolin (*Manis javanica*), because of the effect of its wide, heavy tail; often the allusion is remote, even obscure, not only for me but for many Semais as well, e.g. /naar loo?/ "two penises" for the Black-banded squirrel (*Callosciurus nigrovittatus*), one for his wife, one for his favorite branch, so I was told; sometimes the secret names are not even distinctive for one species, e.g. /bah sabat/ "Mr. imitation-disease"<sup>16</sup> is used for the Sambhur deer (*Cervus unicolor*), the Pig-tailed macaque (*Macaca nemestrina*) and the Long-tailed giant rat (*Rattus sabanus*). Syntactically, secret names are not always Nouns or even simple words, e.g. /bah salut/ "Mr. ouch!" for the Bear-cat (*Arctitis binturong*), where /salut/ is an exclamation indicating burning pain, because the animal is known to sit on the hearths of abandoned houses, or /bah tlɔk ?ec/ "Mr. snap-dung" for the Pig-tailed macaque (*Macaca nemestrina*) because it is known to inspect other animals' droppings, or /bah hi gu ɔ̃h/ "Mr. we-usually-light (it)" for the Bear-cat, another allusion to

sitting on hearths; sometimes secret names are made of syntactic constructs which violate the most elementary rules of Semai syntax, e.g. /bah koh tək/ "Mr. chop hand" for the Black giant squirrel (*Ratufa bicolor*) because it does not have thumbs<sup>17</sup>: in a normal Semai sentence a transitive verb like /koh/ with an expressed object /tək/ would require a prefix marking agreement with the Agent, even if the Agent itself is omitted, and the specific Noun /tək/ should have the preposed article /ʔi/; one would expect /bah bi-koh ʔi-tək/. All this disregard for syntactic categories and rules indicate that we are dealing with purely semantic associations: taboo names, like metaphors, give us almost direct access to semantic systems.<sup>18</sup>

As an example of the taboo naming system, I include here a number of names, and their respective categories, for one species taken at random from my data:

Bear-cat (*Arctitis binturong*)

(This animal is known to settle on the hearths of abandoned houses. It is the object of "mixing-taboo" /pnalii?/ because it resembles a mythical species closely associated to ʔŋkuu?).

Real name = bnbaat

Taboo names (names for naming):

Disgracing names:

- /(bah) knrɛp/ = "Mr. bend-down" (it is known to bend under logs)
- /bah mnco?/ = "Mr. bait"
- /bah dəp/ = "Mr. settle"
- /(bah) rŋah/ = "Mr. black" (Expressive)
- /bah dŋrəp/ = "Mr. temporary-house"
- /bah butun/ = "Mr. buttocks-stick-out" (Expressive)
- /bah lɔɔt/ = "Mr. come-out"
- /bah lɔɔt kiit/ = "Mr. ass come-out"

Secret names:

- /coo? ʔŋkuu?/ "dog of the mythical thunder-bear"
- /bah hantuu?/ "Mr. ghost" (allusion to abandoned houses )
- /(bah) ʔɔɔs/ "Mr. fire"
- /lʔkaa? ʔɔɔs/ "fire tree-meat" (Cf. Dentan 1968)
- /(bah) salut/ "Mr. ouch! it burns!"
- /salut kiit/ "ouch! ass burns!"
- /(bah) hi gu nɔh/ "Mr. we usually light it"
- /(bah) tnhā?/ "Mr. genital offense" (sitting on a hearth is equivalent to having intercourse with a very old person and will result in genital distension) (Cf. Dentan 1968.)

It should be clear from what precedes that this list is neither complete nor entirely used by all Semais. New names keep being invented, and there appears to be no specific rule which would allow one to predict much about what the new name will be. There are some

established semantic habits, as outlined above, but these are ill-defined, and in any case, surprising new twists are always welcome and appreciated. The only semantic restriction one could reasonably propose is that the allusions be understood by other humans; but I am not sure even that limitation will hold: often the animal name is indeed incomprehensible, and the audience, often a younger person, will be kept guessing, and the time is not for asking questions. Linguistic improvisation has its drawbacks.

A rapid inspection of the thesaurus I have compiled of such names reveals another interesting fact about the variety of taboo represented here. What is being avoided in the real name is actually not its phonological representation but rather its lexicalisation; the principle is that species X should not be called by the real name for that species: the lexicalisation process must be derailed and some other way of naming must be found; but the real names themselves, as phonological words, are nothing to be upset about. The proof, so to speak, is that they can very well be used as secret names, or as parts of secret names, for naming other animals. For instance, the Malay civet (*Viverra zibellina*) has a secret name: /kalak prahuu?/ "the **L**insang of boats", where /kalak/ is in fact the real name for the **L**insang (*Prionodon linsang*), an animal which resembles the Malay Civet. Such cases are not very common however, because one is never sure that the second animal is not overhearing, or somehow involved in whatever delicate situation made one decide to use a secret name for the first. But the possibility of using real names in this fashion shows that it is lexical, not phonological derailment which is sought after.

It is not difficult to find in our own cultures certain taboo-like linguistic systems which operate on the same general principle, though with different motivations and results. Slang, the metaphoric language of subcultures<sup>19</sup> within our own societies, comes from a decision to derail lexicalisations which are typical of the "straight" language; so when someone says "vire tes pincés" he means "enlève tes mains" but rejects the normal lexicalisation of the verb "to remove" and of the noun "hands". Note that the replacing lexical items "vire" and "pincés" are perfectly acceptable words of the straight language, but not with the meanings they are now given. It is easy to see that, in slang, it would be possible, at least in principle, to taboo everything at all times. Even standard conversational English abounds in pragmatically conditioned lexical replacement: speakers hardly ever strive at unequivocal precision ("at school, ...the other day..., her boyfriend..."); rather, the rule of thumb seems to be: remain as vague as you possibly can, the hearer can always, and often does, ask for clarification. And this is to say nothing of round-about, colorful, humorous styles of speech and individual habits, which are not just imprecise, but deliberately inventive, side-tracking or misleading, in ways which must be improvised if conversation is not to remain exasperatingly explicit.

Footnotes

1. This formulation begs several questions regarding the existence and nature of static structures and rules. Without entering this area as a philosopher would, it is clear that all linguistic utterances are in some ways novel to the speaker and the participants; this novelty may or may not turn into the dead wood we call structure or system of rules. Timeless individual competence is only a useful fiction. I mean one which entirely depends for its survival and credibility upon the uses to which it is put.
2. Recall that the notion of grammaticality is, and remains, the foundation stone of Chomskian linguistics and its various heirs.
3. Semai is one of the aboriginal languages of the Malay Peninsula (West Malaysia), spoken in the states of Perak and Pahang by about 17,000 people; it belongs to the Aslian branch of the Mon-khmer family. "Central Sakai" was the name generally used for it before the second world war.
4. Note other abnormal phonetics in other cases of obscenity: [ffʌk] is sometimes pronounced with a unique kind of labio-dental whereby the lower lip is pulled up into the mouth cavity and the upper incisors close in on what would normally be half-way down between the lip and the chin. Sometimes the articulation is frozen at that point and the rest of the word is not uttered: this silent articulatory gesture is sufficient for communication with the onlooker while respectful of the hearing sense of others.
5. Throughout this paper, unless otherwise stated, Semai forms will be given in what I called the C (central) dialect.
6. For instance, the existence of a verb /diŋ kuur/ "to keep mentioning someone's name"; the literal meaning of this verb is "to knock on someone's head, e.g. with a log". Even one mention of a person's name is thought to be sufficient to make him choke on his food at that very moment, even miles away.
7. About 250 species, not counting fishes and about 200 insect species.
8. /muh/ = "name", /brnɔɔr/ is from the Proto Semai root \*bɔɔr "good", with -n- infixation, followed by infixation of the final consonant between the two initial consonants: b-r-nɔɔr; the application of these two rules, in that order, creates a -C<sub>1</sub>n- infix which has, among other grammatical functions, the effect of turning a verb into a Restricted Relative Participle which is postposed to the head noun /muh/. The same affix is also used for various Nominalisations.
9. /cnacəəʔ/ is from Proto Semai \*cɯwɿ which does not exist

as a free verb root any more but has left a derivative verb \*cacuw? "to disgrace". With -n- infixation this verb is made into a Restrictive Relative Participle /cna\_cəə? / placed after the Antecedent /muh/. The expression /muh cna\_cəə? / could also be translated "name with-which-one-disgraces-someone".

10. /krndɛy/ is from the Proto Semai verb \*kday "not to know". To this root is added, first, an -n- infix for creating a Restrictive Relative Participle, and second, an -r- infix which creates causatives in original CCVC roots. The interesting detail here is that /muh/ the Antecedent of /krndɛy/ cannot be the Agent of the verb /krdɛy/ 'to cause not to know' since Inanimate Nouns like /muh/ cannot be the Agent of causatives; it has to be the Instrument, and thus the awkward translation.

11. This is not too far-fetched because this word /brnɔr/ is found in single word questions, with falling intonation as is normal in Semai questions, used much in the same way as "-really?" is, to punctuate English conversations.

12. "Thundersqualls" are usually called /ʔŋkuu?/ themselves but I believe this is not the real name of "thundersqualls", just a reference to their origin.

13. What is said here of animals should be extended to a large number of plants, namely those which are eaten. As a result, a very large part of the forest environment, the world with which the Semai identify, comes under naming-taboo.

14. This word /krmmwɪh/ has an -N- infix for forming Restrictive Relative Participles, placed in a verb root /krmwɪh/ "to name". The verb presents a historical puzzle because it appears to contain a kr-prefix which is used for Malevolent Causatives. But the root would be \*/mwɪh/ "to have a name", too similar to the Noun /muh/ "name" for the resemblance to be accidental; yet Semai is not known to have vowel alternations of this kind. Malevolent Causatives differ from ordinary Causatives in that the causation is done with evil intentions: e.g. /caa?/ "to eat", /brcaa?/ "to feed (normal causative)", /krcaa?/ "to poison", thus the existence of a verb /krmwɪh/ "to name" with a possible kr-prefix would confirm the unpleasant connotations attached by the Semais to the act of naming, as claimed above.

15. The existence of these disgracing names shows that the taboo system is not really inspired by the fear of animals. But I suspect that Semais do not believe these disgracing names to be understood by animals, while I was told that real names would be, that is why they, and they alone, should be avoided.

16. /sabat/, Proto Semai \*sabadn (Gf. Malay: sawan, which

describes a variety of ailments) is one of several disease patterns of Semai medicine; /sabat/ is disease by imitation, e.g. touching fresh fish would /sabat/ a pregnant woman: the sensation of something slipping out of the hand may impress her with the fear of miscarriage to the point of causing it. The Sambhur deer is known, by Semais, to be prone to epileptic fits; eating that flesh may, in some cases, cause epileptic fits, whence /sabat/ as a name for the deer. As for the macaque, it is known that children will shake limbs, make faces and speak like monkeys after eating it. I have no explanations for the rat.

17. I have not yet found confirmation of this in the zoological literature.

18. Most current "semantic" studies are actually studies in semantax, that is, semantics as revealed by syntax, not such a great improvement on the older type of semantics as revealed by lexicon.

19. Note that slang is particularly alive in social circles where literacy is not highly praised or where its prestige is questioned. Taboo on lexicalisation seems at home in oral culture; phonological taboo befits a society where reified language, writing, has an overwhelming presence.

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