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LINGUISTIC TABOO IN AFRICAN MARRIAGE

АФРИКАЛЫК НИКЕ МАМИЛЕСИНДЕГИ ТАБУ

ЯЗЫКОВОЕ ТАБУ В АФРИКАНСКИХ БРАКАХ

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Abstract

This paper presents a descriptive examination of a cultural practice within the Oromo community of Ethiopia, known as *laguu* or *lagacha*. This custom involves refraining from mentioning the names of relatives by marriage. The phenomenon is significant within ethnolinguistics, particularly in this culture, yet it remains relatively unexplored in literature. The study reveals that due to this language taboo, individuals such as spouses and in-laws refrain from using each other's names and instead employ various alternative terms, many of which are newly created. It further delves into the taboo words and elucidates the methods employed to find substitutes.

Keywords: Linguistic taboo, language prohibitions, euphemistic words, marital relations, African linguoculturology.

АФРИКАЛЫК НИКЕ МАМИЛЕСИНДЕГИ ТАБУ

Аннотация

Бул макалада Эфиопиянын Оромо коомчулугунун лингво маданий жактан изилдөө болуп саналат. Нике мамилесиндеги туугандарынын ысымдарын атоодон алыс болууну камтыйт. Бул көрүнүш этнолингвистикада, лингво маданиятта олуттуу, адабиятта таанууда жаатында салыштырмалуу аз изилденген бойдон калууда. Изилдөө темасы ушундан улам актуалдуу экени көрүнүп турат. Тилдик тыюулар жубайлар жана туугандар мамилесинде кандай альтернативалуу терминдерди аркылуу колдонулары талкууланат. Тил илиминде тыюу салынган сөздөрдү, алмаштыруучу тергөөлөрдү изилдөө бүгүнкү күндүн талабы бойдон калууда.

Ачкыч сөздөр: Табу, тилдик тыюулар, тергөө сөздөрү, нике мамилеси, Африка тил маданияты.

ЯЗЫКОВОЕ ТАБУ В АФРИКАНСКИХ БРАКАХ

Аннотация

Эта статья представляет собой описательное изучение культурной практики в рамках Оромо общины Эфиопии, известный как *laguu* или *lagacha*. Этот обычай предполагает воздержание от упоминания имен родственников по браку. Явление значительное в рамках этнолингвистики, в частности, в эту культуру, однако он остается сравнительно мало изученной в литературе. Исследование показывает, что из-за этого языковые табу, лиц например, супругов и родственников, воздержитесь от использования друг друга по именам и вместо того, чтобы использовать различные альтернативные термины, многие из которых были созданы недавно. Далее он углубляется в Табу слов и проливает свет на методы, применяемые, чтобы найти заменители.

Ключевые слова: табу, языковые запреты, эвфемистические слова, брачные отношения, Африканская лингвокультурология.

Introduction

Linguistic taboos, the practice of avoiding certain words or expressions, are prevalent in various societies worldwide. In traditional African cultures, terms deemed indecent, shocking, or immoral are intentionally avoided to prevent discomfort or offense within the community. For instance, in Madagascar, the term "fady" is used to denote and justify numerous prohibitions among different ethnic groups. Similarly, various Bantu tribes, such as those speaking Kinyarwanda, Lingala, and Ciluba, have their own names for taboo concepts, like "imi-ziro," "bi-kila," or "bi-jila."

However, linguistic taboos extend beyond matters of decency; they often reflect societal conventions and values. Certain words or expressions may be restricted due to specific social norms or beliefs. Trudgill (1986: 29) notes that tabooed items differ from one society to another. In English-speaking cultures, the strongest taboos typically revolve around sex, followed by those related to bodily functions. In Norway, taboo language often involves expressions linked to the devil, while in Roman Catholic cultures, it may center on religious terminology.

In traditional African societies, linguistic taboos encompass a range of topics including sex, body parts, death, marriage, kinship relations, as well as names of certain birds and animals. For instance, in Ciluba, the word for sex is substituted with "mesu," meaning "eyes." Similarly, in Wolof, the commonly used term for sex is "kanam," which translates to "face." For example, the Wolof phrase "to chat up a girl" is rendered as "to ask for a face" (gnan kanam).

Regarding death, euphemistic expressions are prevalent, particularly when announcing the passing of an esteemed individual. In Ciluba, death may be described as "disappearing," while in Wolof, phrases like "finishing one's work" or "sleeping" are used. In Lingala, expressions such as "going" or "leaving" are employed in reference to death.

Respectful language practices also involve addressing individuals, particularly elders, with euphemisms. For instance, in Mandingo culture, elder siblings are respectfully referred to as "Kollo" and "Diadia" (elder brother and elder sister) rather than by their given names. Additionally, out of respect, Luba women may refer to their husbands as "uncles," "chiefs," or "dads," while husbands might address their wives using terms like "Muina kuanyi" (the owner of my house), "Mwa bana" (the mother of children), or by the names of their children, such as "Mwa Mbuyi" (mother of Mbuyi) [3; 6].

Taboo words, due to their potency, are commonly employed as swearwords to convey emotions such as hatred, antagonism, frustration, pain, or surprise.

In societies, adherence to taboo words and similar language conventions is expected from all members. Violations of these norms can result in punishment or public humiliation. However, there are specific contexts where the use of such words is permitted, albeit within a limited range of situations.

This paper presents a descriptive analysis of laguu or lagacha, a linguistic taboo observed within the Oromo ethnic group in Ethiopia. This taboo involves refraining from mentioning the names of individuals who are related by marriage. Instead of using their proper names or those of their in-laws, spouses and their relatives employ euphemistic terms, many of which are newly created. The study examines the taboo words avoided and elucidates the methods employed to find substitutes.

This work consists of two main sections. The first section provides background information on the history, geography, cultural practices, and marriage system of the Oromo tribe. The second section focuses on *laguu*, exploring when, how, and why it is observed, the types of names that are avoided, the substitutes used, and the consequences of violating this custom. The study sets the stage for future research endeavors that could delve deeper into language usage and cultural dynamics within the Oromo tribe. Both written documents and insights from academic Oromo informants have been utilized in this study.

Materials and Research methods

The Oromo people trace their origins to the central region of what is now the Republic of Ethiopia. They inhabit twelve out of the fourteen administrative regions within Ethiopia, spanning the northern, southern, and western areas, as well as communities in Kenya and Somalia (Tesema, 1986). Demographically, they constitute a significant tribal group, comprising approximately 40% of Ethiopia's population.

According to Baxter (1986), the Oromo are among the oldest and most widespread culturally homogeneous groups in Africa, numbering among the first 23 such groups. Their primary economic activities include cattle breeding, agriculture, and hunting. The Oromo language, known as *Afaan Oromo*, is widely spoken and encompasses several dialects. Despite its widespread use, written documentation in this language is relatively scarce compared to Amharic, which serves as a *lingua franca* in Ethiopia.

The cultural practices of the Oromo people encompass various rituals, including ceremonial celebrations, the adoption system known as *Gudifacha*, wedding ceremonies, and reverence for the fertility of both the land and women. These cultural elements are integral to the identity and traditions of the Oromo community.

In Oromo culture, the responsibility for arranging marriages lies with both the families of the prospective bride and groom, rather than solely with the individuals involved. Typically, the boy's parents select a suitable girl based on her character and the reputation of her family. While wealth may sometimes play a role, it is not always a determining factor. Girls are typically between the ages of 10 and 14 when marriage is considered, while boys are typically between 16 and 20.

The marriage contract is finalized upon payment of a dowry to the girl's parents. The nature of the dowry varies by region but typically includes both money and domestic animals, such as cows or sheep. The engagement period typically lasts from 2 to 3 years, during which the girl receives guidance from female relatives while the boy assists his father with agricultural work or other familial responsibilities.

Maintaining the girl's virginity until marriage is highly valued, as any loss of chastity could tarnish her and her family's reputation. Following the wedding ceremony, the young couple assumes their roles as husband and wife and prepares for their future as parents [4].

While taboos exist among the Oromo people across various regions, this paper will specifically focus on their usage within the Illubabor Administrative region. Moreover, the analysis will center on the context of marriage, specifically examining the practice of avoiding the mention of proper names within this particular context.

Results and Discussion

This study utilized a descriptive qualitative method, which is well-suited for collecting data to characterize, outline, or depict naturally occurring phenomena without experimental manipulation (Seliger and Shohamy, 1989). Qualitative research offers insights into the motives, meanings, actions, and reactions of individuals within the context of their daily lives. Essentially, it focuses on understanding the interpretations and significance that people attribute to events, objects, individuals, and situations in their environment (Ghounane, 2013).

The primary data for this study was gathered through focus group discussions and interviews conducted with members of the Oromo communities residing in the Bale, Wollega, and Hararghe zones of the Oromia region [4].

The fiancée or wife adheres to the practice of avoiding not only the name of her fiancé or husband but also refrains from mentioning the names of various relatives, including:

a) Father, mother, step-father, step-mother(s), grandfather, grandmother, step-grandfather, and step-grandmother(s). b) Brother(s), sister(s), step-brother(s), and step-sister(s), irrespective of age. c) Uncle(s), aunt(s), nephew(s), and niece(s), regardless of age.

In certain regions, such as Arsi, the wife is provided with a list of taboo-names four days after marriage by four elderly women [4].

To navigate the avoidance of mentioning their husband's names, wives employ various substitution mechanisms. These include:

A) Use of honorific pronouns:

- "Isin": Literally "you" (plural) or honorific "you" (singular) used for address only.
- "Isaan": Literally "they" (plural) or honorific "he" (singular) used for reference.

B) Use of different expressions such as:

- "Jaarsa ko/kiyya" or "jera ko/kiyya": "My husband" (in both address and reference).
- "Jerri ko/kiyya": "My husband" (in reference).
- "Jera kénna" or "jera kenna/keennaa": "Our husband" (in a polygamous situation in both address and reference).
- "Warra ko" or "warra/kenna/keennaa": "Head of my family," "head of our family" (in both address and reference).

C) Use of "Abbaa" (father of) plus a child's proper name:

- "Abbaa gammachu": "Gammachu's father" (where Gammachu is male). In

this scenario, the proper name used is not subject to laguu; moreover, it should be the name of the first-born child. Before the birth of the first child, the husband and wife may select a proper name for an imaginary male child and utilize it. An imaginary feminine name is never chosen as Oromos traditionally prefer their first-born to be a son. In cases of childlessness, the adopted imaginary name will be retained, and if a female child is born, a name can be improvised.

A husband is not obligated to refrain from mentioning his wife's name, although over time, he may choose to exercise discretion in doing so. This discretion may involve improvising names or

utilizing the "haa'da" formula. For instance, as his wife ages, the husband might commonly refer to or address her as "Haa'da manaa ko" (my wife), "Haa'da so and so" (mother of so and so), or "Jaarti ko" (my old woman) [1].

However, when it comes to addressing parents-in-law, strict adherence to custom is required. The husband typically addresses and refers to them as "abbayyo" (father-in-law) and "dayyo/daye" (mother-in-law). As for the wife's other relatives, the husband usually follows the taboo custom in address but exercises discretion in reference.

Improvisations often occur in relation to commemorating an event or expressing a wish. For instance:

- "Roodbu" (She who is married in the rainy season)
- "Obse" (She who causes the husband to forget the death or desertion of his former wife or close relative)
- "Ba'daatu" (She who brings prosperity to the husband and his family)
- "Hortu" (She who is fertile), implying that the husband either has no children from a previous marriage or wishes for his wife to be fertile.

In Illubabor, male parents address and refer to each other as "Abbaa Soddaa," while female parents address and refer to each other as "Haa'da Soddaa."

In Oromo culture, people are particularly vigilant about not violating customs, as it is believed that doing so could lead to misfortune. For example, wives fear giving birth to children with scaly skin disease, causing the death of their husband, or endangering agricultural, hunting, or fishing endeavors. Interestingly, the primary victim of taboo violation isn't necessarily the disobedient individual themselves [2].

Instances of taboo violations are exceptionally rare. When they do occur, it's typically in reference rather than in direct address, often by accident rather than a deliberate act of defiance against social norms. However, there are exceptions in some African cultures:

- In certain Central African tribes, mothers of twins are permitted to utter various words and expressions in public, particularly during traditional ceremonies.
- During initiation ceremonies in West Africa, children have the freedom to engage in various actions, including asking girls to show them their genitals or attempting to sexually assault them.
- In Wolof culture, a wedding ceremony known as "khakhar" is held when the bride joins her husband. During this event, particularly women, are allowed to insult or physically harm the wife and her relatives, sing provocative songs, and engage in other shocking behaviors.

In cases of accidental violation, individuals typically seek to symbolically atone for the impropriety by "spitting it out" as a form of ritual purification. However, if a violation occurs in the presence of the husband, who perceives it as a deliberate insult, it may lead to physical violence or even divorce [3].

In conclusion, the practice of language taboo within the context of marriage is deeply ingrained among the Oromo people. Husband, wife, and their families employ various strategies to find or invent substitutes for proper names. However, this custom appears to be diminishing, particularly in

urban areas, due to the rapid economic and social changes occurring. While still prevalent in rural areas, the influence of urbanization is likely to eventually impact its continuation. Some individuals already view it as an inconvenience or social burden and advocate for its abandonment. This phenomenon may not only be of interest to ethnolinguists but also to sociologists and anthropologists, as similar patterns may be observed among other ethnic groups in Ethiopia and beyond.

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