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## Chapter 12

### Linguistic taboos in a second or foreign language<sup>1</sup>

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This chapter investigates the issues that arise when second and foreign language (LX) users include swearwords and taboo words in their speech. Knowing how to use these words appropriately requires considerable pragmatic competence. The difficulties that LX users face can arise from gaps in the semantic and conceptual representations of the LX swearwords and taboo words which leaves them unsure about their exact meaning, their emotional force, their offensiveness and their perlocutionary effects. Paradoxically, perfect knowledge of the LX is no guarantee for successful use of swearwords and taboo words because interlocutors might judge that LX users (identifiable though a foreign accent for example) do not have the right to use their swearwords and taboo words because they do not belong to the ‘in-group’. LX users are generally aware that LX swearing is a linguistic minefield that requires extra caution.

**Keywords:** swearwords and taboo words, foreign language (LX) users, meaning, emotional force, offensiveness, frequency of use, affective processing, language embodiment

#### 1. Introduction

Keith Allen (chapter 1) defines as taboo the use of taboo words and language ‘in certain contexts; in short, the taboo applies to instances of language behavior’ which are ‘perceived as in some way harmful to an individual or their community’. The mention of community is crucial because there is nothing intrinsic in the words or expressions that makes them taboo, the taboo originates in the attitudes of the people of the community towards these words and expressions. Allen argues that ‘shared taboos are a sign of social cohesion’. In other words, the agreement on what is unspeakable matters as much within a community as the agreement on what can be said. Only insiders know exactly what is taboo and what not. Those who break the taboo are more likely to be outsiders who are unaware of the taboo on certain words or topics. Insiders can break the taboo too, by wilfully ignoring it and being perfectly aware of the social consequences of their violation of the rules. In football terms, one could imagine a situation where the local team has just lost against a rival team, which might have hurt the pride of local supporters to the point that mentioning the defeat has become taboo. However, support for the team and a firm belief in future victories has not wavered and creates a strong bond between the community members.

Taboos can appear in a flash: a day after the death of Diana, princess of Wales on 31 August 1997, my wife and I -who are Belgians- returned to home to London from a trip abroad. Listening to the sobbing in interviews on the radio we became aware that this tragic

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event was triggering mass hysteria. Diana was a public figure who had been portrayed relentlessly in the press as an attractive, brave but flawed Princess who had lost her title of *Her Royal Highness* a year earlier after her divorce from Prince Charles. This fatal car crash had suddenly turned her into ‘the people’s princess’ and a saint. As I got out of the car in front of our house, I noticed our British neighbour who looked quite emotional. She must have detected the smirk on my face as I was preparing some sarcastic remark about the situation and she cut me off before I could open my mouth: ‘Don’t even mention it’, she said, ‘you have no idea what this means to us’. In other words, despite having lived in the UK for four years, I was warned that I did not have the right to make jokes about something I could not possibly understand as a foreigner. The Latin phrase *De mortuis nihil nisi bonum* ‘of the dead, [say] nothing but good’ came to mind. It had suddenly become socially inappropriate to speak ill of the late Diana, and any mention of her extra-marital relationship and eating disorder had become taboo, especially to non-British people.

Communities do not just have taboo topics, they also have taboo words and expressions, which can be used in swearing, defined by Jay (chapter 6) as ‘the use of offensive emotional language to vent our feelings and convey them to other people’. Jay (2009, and this volume, chapter 5) argued that taboohood is a word’s connotative or emotional tag. It is thus part of a word’s semantic representation, defined by Pavlenko (2009) as: ‘the largely implicit knowledge of: (1) the mapping between words and concepts determining how many concepts and which particular concepts are expressed by a particular word via polysemy or metaphoric extension and (2) connections between words, which account for phenomena such as collocation, word association, synonymy and antonymy’ (p. 148). According to Jay’s (2009) emotional tag hypothesis, a language user selects a word based on how offensive it is - assuming for LX users that that information is present and accurate.

Pavlenko (1999) argued that semantic representations are separate from conceptual representations. In other words, LX users may know the meaning of an emotion word but may be unable to deploy it in conversation because of an incomplete emotion concept, defined as ‘prototypical scripts that are formed as a result of repeated experiences and involve causal antecedents, appraisals, physiological reactions, consequences, and means of regulation and display’ (Pavlenko 2008: 149-150).

Appropriate use of swear and taboo words requires proper semantic and conceptual representations as well as considerable sociocultural and sociopragmatic awareness because their use can lead to ‘controversy, disagreement, disdain, shock, and indignation’ (Beers Fägersten and Stapleton 2017: 1) but it can also be interpreted as an indication of ‘passion, sincerity, intimacy, solidarity, and jocularity’ (p. 1). The use of taboo words could be compared to the use of heavy medieval flails. The long version of this weapon had a wooden handle with a flexible rope or chain attached to a cylindrical head, while the shorter version had a round metal striking head with multiple metal spikes. The flail was devastating in strikes around a defender’s shield but it was hard to use with precision. In the hands – or rather in the mouth- of inexperienced users, such as foreign language users (hence LX users<sup>1</sup>), ill-chosen taboo words can cause loss of face to themselves and serious offense to their interlocutors. LX users who have an incomplete semantic or conceptual representation of the words in question may risk under-estimating (or over-estimating) their pragmatic force which can result in pragmalinguistic failure or they may use the words inappropriately in social interaction which will result in embarrassing sociopragmatic failure (Thomas 1983).

Once LX users have developed a sufficiently rich and accurate conceptual representation of a taboo word, they will have sufficient sociopragmatic understanding about its use. This means this will know how often, with whom and in what situation a particular

word or expression can be used. They will be aware of ways to strengthen or to attenuate its perlocutionary effects (i.e. the effect of the illocutionary act). They will be able to combine semantic meaning with intonation type and will be to express emotion not just through the words but using use prosodic cues, pitch variation, parsing patterns intonation (Kyoung Cho 2017). Indeed, “intonation, the music of language, makes a spoken language come alive in communication by carrying subtle pragmatic features (Kyoung Cho 2017: 221). As a result, LX users will feel a certain degree of confidence about their ability to ‘anticipate the likely reaction of interlocutors, what inference they will draw from the usage of the word in a script, and what the social consequences will be’ (Dewaele 2016: 114).

Dewaele (2008) pointed out that LX users with sufficient pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence might still misjudge the effect of LX taboo words on their interlocutors because of their status as outsiders. L1 users may wonder whether the use of taboo words was intentional and whether the speaker realised what they meant and what their pragmatic force was. They may also feel that as an outsider the LX user did not have the right to use these taboo words, which can seem unfair to legitimate LX users.

The present chapter will attempt to answer the question whether and why second or LX users react differently to linguistic taboos in their LX(s) compared to those in their L1(s) and whether they handle these LX taboo words and expressions differently than those in their L1.

## **2. Physiological reactions to taboo words in the LX**

The seminal work in the area of physiological responses to the use of LX taboo words is that of cognitive psychologist Catherine Caldwell-Harris and her colleagues. They looked into the skin conductance responses of 32 balanced Turkish-English bilingual students at Boston University to reprimands (‘Don’t do that!’, ‘Shame on you!’, ‘Go to your room!’), taboo words (curse words, body parts, and sexual terms), aversive words (cancer, kill, death), positive words (bride, joy, kind), and neutral words (column, table) presented visually and auditorily in their L1 Turkish and the translation equivalents in the L2 English (Harris, Ayçiçeği and Gleason 2003). Participants rated items for pleasantness, while skin conductance activity was monitored via fingertip electrodes. The authors found that their participants’ skin conductance responses were significantly stronger for childhood reprimands and slightly less strong for taboo words presented auditorily in the L1 Turkish compared to their translation equivalents in L2 English. However, responsiveness to L2 English taboo words was also very high. The authors speculated that the strong difference between L1 and L2 reprimands was linked to context of acquisition in childhood learning, including ‘fear or anxiety associated with parental reprimands, contributed to an enduring language-specific response’ (p. 262). Age, gender, age of exposure to English, age of arrival in the US, length of stay in the US, self-rated proficiency, nor English verbal proficiency did not predict skin conductance responses.

Harris (2004) repeated the experiment with 52 fluent Spanish–English bilinguals from Latin American families in the US, 31 of which had been born in the US and 21 of which had arrived from Latin America at age 12 or older. The latter group showed stronger skin conductance responses to reprimands in Spanish L1. Early learners of English, who had been through a process of L2 socialisation, responded similarly in Spanish and English.

Harris, Gleason and Ayçiçeği (2006) considered their previous research and developed ‘the emotional contexts of learning theory’ to explain their findings. They argued that the differences in age of onset of learning the L1 and L2 may be linked to different levels of involvement of emotional regulation systems in early childhood. L1(s) are typically

learned in a highly emotional context, in interactions with family members and caregivers. In contrast, LXs may be acquired in the emotional context of attachment to caregivers and peers, but it may also be acquired in more formal settings such as school or work where there may be with fewer intense personal attachments. The authors conclude that ‘Early age of acquisition thus functions as a proxy for a more emotional context of learning.’ (Harris et al. 2006: 273-274).

Caldwell-Harris, Tong, Lung and Poo (2011) measured the reactions of 64 bilingual Mandarin-English speakers to taboo expressions (‘He’s an asshole’, ‘He screwed your mother’, ‘She’s a bitch’) in both languages. Despite the fact that participants judged L1 Mandarin expressions to be stronger than L2 English expressions, many expressed a preference for L2 English taboo phrases, possibly ‘because of the greater social constraints in Chinese culture to minimize emotional expression’ (p. 348). Taboo items in English received slightly higher ratings than the corresponding Mandarin items (p. 342), but skin conductance responses for insults, reprimands and taboo words were comparable in Mandarin and English. Caldwell-Harris (2015) argued that the most common category of explanation for differences between the reactions to taboo words in the L1 and LX is that emotional resonance depends on the exposure in the discourse context because human memory is inherently associative.

Eilola and Havelka (2011) combined skin conductance measures with reaction times in a group of 32 English L1 users and a group of 31 Greek-English bilinguals enrolled at the University of Kent (UK). The researchers used emotional and taboo Stroop tasks. They found significantly slower response times for 20 negative and 20 taboo words compared to response times for neutral words in both groups of participants. English L1 users displayed the expected stronger reactions to negative and taboo words when compared with neutral and positive words but no such difference emerged among the bilinguals, which the authors attribute to the fact that the bilinguals were unbalanced but proficient speakers of English.

The findings of these psychologists turned out to be independently confirmed in the work of applied linguists working on emotionality of L1 and LX, defined as “autonomic arousal elicited by particular languages or words and examined directly” (Pavlenko 2008: 155).

### **3. Perceptions and use of taboo words in L1 and LX**

Intra-speaker and inter-speaker variation have been the focus of a number of studies that were based on the *Bilingualism and Emotion Questionnaire* (BEQ) database containing self-reported perceptions and language preferences for the communication of emotion of over one thousand participants (Dewaele and Pavlenko 2001-2003). The BEQ contained two questions with Likert scales related to swearing and the power of taboo and swear words in all languages known to participants:

If you swear in general, what language do you typically swear in? (never, rarely, sometimes, frequently, all the time, not applicable) (Dewaele 2013: 230). The question was repeated for the L1, L2, L3, L4 and L5.

Do swear and taboo words in your different languages have the same emotional weight for you? (not strong, little, fairly, strong, very strong, not applicable) (p. 230).

One thousand thirty-nine adult multilinguals from all over the world reported a significant preference for swearing in their dominant language, which was typically their L1 (Dewaele 2004a). LXs learnt in classrooms were less likely to be used for swearing. Frequency of use of a LX was positively correlated with LX socialization and both were linked to increased use of the LX for swearing. It is possible that after being completely

immersed in the LX, users judge that they are close enough to the in-group to start copying their use of taboo words (Dewaele 2004a). Gender and education level were unrelated to LX choice for swearing.

In separate study on the emotional force of swearwords and taboo words in multilinguals' various languages, based on the same database, Dewaele (2004b) found similar relationships with the independent variables. Swearwords and taboo words were perceived to be significantly more powerful in the L1, which could lead to avoidance, as a participant explained:

Kevin (Finnish L1, English L2, Swedish L3, German L4): I very rarely swear in Finnish but 'oh shit' or 'fuck' can easily escape my mouth even in quite trivial occasions - they just don't feel that serious to my (or my hearers') ears, even though I know they would sound quite horrible to a native speaker (Dewaele 2004b: 213).

Kevin's statement also suggests that the reduced emotional force of LX swearwords and taboo words make their use more socially acceptable among LX users. The superior emotional power of the L1 swearwords and taboo words is not eternal. Participants who were no longer dominant in their L1 judged L1 swearwords and taboo words to be significantly weaker than those who were dominant in the L1 or who those were equally dominant in the L1 and an LX (Dewaele 2004c). This suggests that the finding that the L1 is more emotional and LXs more detached does not reflect a law of nature (Dewaele 2013). It is a reflection of the fact that there is a higher probability that multilinguals are dominant in their L1 rather than an LX (Dewaele 2013: 217). However, intense affective socialization in the LX can drain the emotional power of L1 swearwords (Dewaele 2004c). Finally, a strong positive relationship was found between emotional force of swearwords and taboo words in a language and their frequency of use. In other words, participants were more likely to use words in a language that had emotional force (Dewaele 2004a: 101). Some participants, typically of Asian or Arabic background deviated from the general preference for the L1 to swear in. Because of heavy social constraints on swearing in their L1, they resorted to swearing in English LX which allowed them to vent their anger without upsetting their interlocutors and risking social stigma. This was the case of Layla (Arabic L1, English L2, resident in the UK):

Speaking of swearing, (...) I never swear in Arabic, never never at all, because I know exactly what it means, because it's my language anyway, and how offensive it would be to swear, but in English because it's not my native language, sometimes I use some swearwords, but I don't really aware I'm not really aware of how immense those words are. One of the words that sometimes I use is 'bloody', 'bloody rude' you know, this is the only swearword I use (Dewaele 2013: 125).

Another participant, Anne Marie (English L1, Japanese L2, resident in Japan) explained that the nature of the emotion concept determined the language choice for swearing. Referring to the question on swearing in the BEQ, she explained:

I circled '2' in both L1 and L2. To be honest I rarely swear, but (...) my brain chooses the most appropriate feeling that I'm experiencing, be it a Japanese word or an English word. For instance, in certain situations an English swearword is more appropriate to express my anger. However, in other situations, a Japanese swearword is quicker to the surface (Dewaele unpublished material).

Dewaele (2011) focused on the use of French for swearing among 628 LX users of French extracted from the BEQ. Level of proficiency and socialization in French were positively linked with swearing in French. The context of acquisition of French did emerge as

a significant variable after an average of fifteen years of regular contact with French: those who had used their French in authentic communication outside the classroom were more likely to swear in French than those who had acquired French through classroom instruction only.

In order to find out whether multilinguals who felt maximally proficient in an L1 and an LX -and used both constantly- displayed language preferences for swearing, Dewaele (2010, 2011) selected a subsample of 386 participants from the BEQ. It turned out that the L1 was preferred for swearing and that L1 swearwords were considered to be significantly emotionally stronger than LX swearwords.

The effect of context of acquisition and age of onset of learning on the frequency of swearing in the LX was analysed in Dewaele (2005, 2011, 2013). A subsample of 486 pentalinguals extracted from the BEQ showed that an early acquisition of an LX was linked to more frequent swearing in that language. Also, participants who had learned the LX only through formal instruction reported less frequent swearing than those who had learned the LX through mixed or naturalistic learning. Frequent LX use, strong LX socialization, including a rich network of LX interlocutors, were linked to more swearing in the LX, confirming earlier research (Dewaele 2013).

Resnik (to appear) used the BEQ to collect data from 167 multilinguals, a majority of which had German as an L1 and English as an LX with the remaining participants combining Thai, Chinese or Japanese as an L1 and English as an LX. Participants were found to prefer the L1 for swearing. Swearing in the LX was linked to age of onset of acquisition, self-perceived proficiency and frequency of use. The emotional weight of swear and taboo words was significantly higher in the L1 than in the LX, where it was marginally linked to self-perceived proficiency.

Looking back at the research based on the BEQ, it is clear that it allowed a first broad look at general patterns in the self-reported use and the perception of swearwords and taboo words in a great variety of languages from participants from all over the world. I decided that the next phase of research in this domain would require more granularity, which would imply a set of actual words and expressions in a single language, and feedback from L1 and LX users of that language. Dewaele (2016, 2017b) are based on data collected from 2347 English users via an online questionnaire with the aim to catch individual differences in self-reported swearing frequency in English and the perception of offensiveness and frequency of use of 30 negative emotion-laden words extracted from the British National Corpus. Independent variables included sociobiographical variables, linguistic profiles and three personality traits. A total of 1159 English L1 users (of which 83% were multilingual) and 1165 English LX language users participated in the study (Dewaele 2016, 2017b). Swearing turned out to be significantly more common with friends, followed by swearing alone, and happened less frequently with family members, colleagues and strangers. The 1159 English L1 users reported swearing significantly more in English than the 1165 LX users. Participants with high scores on Psychoticism, Extraversion and Neuroticism reported significantly more swearing. LX proficiency and use, an early start of acquisition and the use of English outside school when learning the language was linked to more frequent swearing in English across interlocutors.

The list of 30 negative emotion-laden words included relatively mild nouns and adjectives such as 'comedian', 'daft', 'silly', 'fool', and really taboo words and expressions such as 'fucking hell', 'slut', 'prick' and 'cunt' (Dewaele 2016). The words appeared in short sentences and were followed by Likert scales to enquire about the understanding of each item, its offensiveness and its frequency of use. The analysis of differences between L1 and

LX users for the 30 words and expressions yielded some unexpected findings. As could have been expected, the LX users reported significantly more uncertainty about the meaning of 22 of the words and expressions and reported different frequencies of use for 25 words and expressions with lower frequency of the taboo words and higher frequency of non-taboo words (p. 119). However, rather than underestimating offensiveness, as had been hypothesised based on the findings of the BEQ, LX users significantly **overestimated** the offensiveness of 29 out of the 30 words and expressions, with the exception of the most offensive one: ‘cunt’. Having lived in an English-speaking environment affected LX users’ perception of offensiveness of 6 words: ‘fool’ and ‘silly’ were judged less offensive less offensive, while ‘loser’, ‘cunt’, ‘thick’ and ‘wanker’ were considered more offensive compared to LX users who had not lived in English-speaking regions (p. 120). Context of acquisition was found to have an effect on understanding and frequency of use of the words and expressions. Oral proficiency was positively linked to understanding, to higher offensiveness ratings for the more offensive words and expressions and lower offensiveness ratings for less offensive words and expressions, and higher frequency of use of the words in the medium range of offensiveness, namely ‘bugger’, ‘thick’, ‘bonkers’, ‘jerk’, ‘moron’, ‘nutter’, ‘bastard’ and ‘prick’.

The effect of the independent variables on the 30 negative emotion-laden words and expressions identified in Dewaele (2016) were broadly similar to the patterns that were uncovered in the studies based on the BEQ. Long exposure to these words and expressions across a wide variety of situations with various interlocutors allowed language users to calibrate their perlocutionary effects accurately. Moreover, having used and misused the words as part of language socialisation made users more confident with these words. L1 users have an undeniable advantage over LX users because of longer, more intense and more varied exposure from birth. LX users, on the other hand, would have had a delayed start in hearing and using these words, would have had more limited exposure to a smaller number of words if they studied the LX at school, and would have had fewer opportunities to experiment with these words. LX users’ uncertainty about the exact meaning of these words and the avoidance of the taboo words is a logical consequence. One burning question remained: why did LX users overestimate the offensiveness of most words? Part of the explanation may be that teachers warn foreign language learners against the use of negative emotion-laden words, which could lead to the –wrong- blanket assumption that they are more offensive than they really are. Learners may attach a metaphorical and relatively indiscriminate ‘red flag’ to them to remind them of the sociopragmatic danger they represent. The teacher’s advice is sensible since learners do not (yet) belong to the target language in-group, their understanding of what is taboo in the LX is still fuzzy and their swearing in the LX might be considered inappropriate by L1 users. As the LX learners become LX users and socialise in the LX, they get more opportunities to hear the words and deduce the pragmatic value of their prosody and intonation contours before starting to use the words themselves. It is a long and gradual process because their avoidance of taboo words in the LX limits the feedback they receive on their appropriateness of use. They do end up identifying words and expressions that are relatively safe for them to use, typically situated in the midrange of offensiveness.

Intrigued by the atypical behaviour of ‘cunt’ and its offensiveness and tabooess being underestimated by LX users, Dewaele (2017c) decided to focus specifically on this word. He argued that the word is so taboo in English that it is censored in the written press (replaced by ‘c\*\*\*\*’ or ‘the c-word’) and beeped out on television or on the radio. It is used quite rarely by L1 users in the database (Mean frequency = 1.4, SD = 1.0, on a 5-point scale) which means that LX users typically have incomplete semantic and conceptual

representations of the word. They did indeed report a weaker significantly weaker understanding of the word than L1 users (2017c: 14). LX users might have been unaware that 'cunt' was not just any red flag word but in fact a 'double-red' one (Dewaele 2016: 123). The link between understanding and self-reported use of the word turned out to be very different in L1 users and LX users. L1 users who rated the word as being very offensive reported using it infrequently. However, LX users who reported higher offensiveness claimed more frequent use compared to those who rated the word lower (with the exception of LX users who had lived in an English-speaking environment). It is possible that LX users who live in non-English-speaking environments can use the word 'cunt' with a certain degree of impunity as their listeners are less likely to be offended. As a consequence, English LX users might believe that 'cunt' is just another swearword, not perceiving the second red flag marking it as really taboo by L1 users. Participants with high levels of Extraversion, Neuroticism and Psychoticism used the word more frequently, as were those who were male, younger (teenagers especially), lowly educated, and working in a swearing-rich environment. Frequency of use of the word was lower among LX users who had started learning English late, through formal instruction, who reported lower levels of oral proficiency and frequency of use of English, and who had not lived in an English-speaking environment. The same patterns were generally weaker for the understanding of the word and its perceived offensiveness. One important finding was that taboo words can be used -sparingly- to gain social prestige. The conclusion about its use in social interactions by L1 and LX users was that it 'requires considerable sociopragmatic skills, typically honed through years of socialisation in the speech community (...) as 'cunt' really is the verbal equivalent of dynamite' (2017c: 27).

Shakiba (in preparation) collected data from 254 Persian L1 English L2 bi- and multilinguals using an online questionnaire with a list of 10 swearwords in Farsi and a list of 10 swearwords in English. A minority of participants (n = 50) lived in Iran, the rest lived in English-speaking countries. She adopted a mixed methods approach to investigate the relationships between acculturation, personality traits and the self-reported swearing behaviour of Persian immigrants outside Iran. She found that immigrants who scored high on acculturation into English-speaking society preferred swearing in English. High scorers on the traits of Social Initiative (Extraversion) and Emotional Stability (the reverse end of Neuroticism) used English swearwords more often. Male participants with lower scores on Emotional Stability reported significantly more frequent use of Persian swearwords. The well-established swearword 'Ashghal' ('dirty, garbage') was used significantly more by Persian immigrants outside Iran while the relatively new swearword 'Oskol' ('useless silly person') was used more frequently by those who live in Iran. Shakiba also found that the 5 swearwords with extremely negative emotional valence were rated as more offensive by participants living in Iran. This suggests that living abroad affects the perception and use of L1 swearwords. Sociopragmatic norms of the immigrant community start diverging from those living in the home country. High frequency of use of L2 English and strong acculturation into mainstream culture were positively correlated with the frequency of use of the words 'Shit', 'Crap', and 'Bitch'. Younger participants, participants with a longer length of residency outside Iran, and participants who started learning English early used English swearwords more frequently.

Jay and Janschewitz (2008) is a pioneering pragmatic study on perceived offensiveness and likelihood of hypothetical scenarios involving the use of taboo words among 68 L1 English and 53 LX English students at the University of California in Los Angeles. The researchers considered the effects of gender, English experience, social-physical context (dean's office, dorm room, parking lot), speaker status (dean, student,

janitor) and the degree of tabooeness of the word (high, medium, low) on the offensiveness and likelihood of hypothetical scenarios using 7-point Likert scales. Significant main effects emerged for offensiveness ratings for speaker (students are expected to swear more than deans), location (swearing in the Dean's office is more offensive than in a students' dorm) and tabooeness (words in the 'high' category -namely 'cocksucker', 'cunt' and 'fuck'- are more offensive across contexts). A significant negative relationship was found between offensiveness ratings and likelihood ratings. Surprisingly, no main effect emerged for English experience on offensiveness ratings, nor on likelihood ratings although 'the range between the highest and lowest average condition rating was larger for native than non-native speakers' (p. 280). The authors argue that this could be linked to variability in English experience among LX users who had spent an average of 11 years in the US, who were generally highly proficient and strongly socialised in English. Those who had become fluent in English later in life had higher average offensive ratings (p. 280). Also, the negative relationship between likelihood and offensiveness ratings was not significant for the LX group. Jay (2009) expanded on the crucial importance of the situation in which swearwords are used, and the degree of formality of the speech in which they occur. A particular swearword may thus not be judged offensive in a casual conversation between friends but would be considered offensive by the same people at a formal event.

Colbeck and Bowers (2012) considered the emotionality of English taboo words in 20 English L1 and 24 English LX users who had Chinese as an L1. They used a Rapid Serial Visual Presentation (RSVP) task to measure the effect of English taboo/sexual words in a embedded in sets of neutral words. Taboo/sexual distracters were found to generate an attentional blink, especially among L1 users. Crucially, the performance of Chinese LX users was less impaired by taboo/sexual distracters than that of L1 users, which confirms the view that the L1 is more emotional than the L2, even when words are processed quickly and automatically.

Vélez-Urbe and Rosselli (2017) investigated how Spanish–English bilinguals appraised three categories of words (positive, negative, and taboo) in both languages in the visual and auditory sensory modalities. They found that taboo words were rated as significantly more negative in Spanish than in English, which confirms the general patterns in the literature.

Gawinkowska, Paradowski and Bilewicz (2013) adopted a different method to investigate the emotional power of LX swearwords. Their participants were 61 bilingual Polish university students with advanced levels of English proficiency. Starting from the assumption that 'socially unaccepted words and utterances (such as swearing) should be more difficult in L1 than in L2' (p. 3), they asked their participants to translate texts rich in swearwords from Polish into English and vice versa. The researchers noticed that the swearword equivalents used were weaker in the Polish translations than in the source text and that the swearwords were stronger in the English translations than in the Polish original. However, the effect was only significant for ethnophaulisms, i.e. expletives directed at social groups. The authors claim that the variation is less linked to the different emotional power of both languages, but rather to different social and cultural norms in English and Polish: 'if the emotion-laden words are at the same level of social acceptance, there should be no difference for bilinguals as for in which language to express them' (p. 5). It is not entirely clear to me whether this research design allowed the authors to draw any conclusions on differences in emotional force of taboo words in the L1 and L2.

Valdeon (2015) used translation of texts of British sitcoms into Spanish to raise 24 students' awareness of pragmatic differences in taboo words in the two languages. He found

that the overall number of taboo words in the English programs (N = 18) more than doubled in the Spanish dubbed versions (N = 46) (p. 380). He pointed out that the case of the translators was different from the situations presented to participants in the BEQ in that there were no social consequences for getting it wrong. He links the results to cultural differences: 'European Spanish is certainly more tolerant of taboo words than British and American English in most contexts, including the media' (p. 381).

A number of researchers have recently looked into the borrowing of English taboo words into other languages such as Danish, Swedish, Finnish, European and Quebecois French, Belgian Dutch and Netherlandic Dutch (Rathje 2017; Beers Fägersten 2017; Hjort 2017, Jaffe 2017; Zenner, Ruetten and Devriendt 2017). The researchers considered the use of English taboo words 'in one or more mediated context(s), such as new and traditional media, including print and broadcast media, online instant messaging, and social media, such as Twitter and Facebook' (Beers Fägersten and Karyn Stapleton 2017: 7).

Jaffe (2017) examined the use of the expressions 'fuck', 'fuck alors', 'what the fuck' in European French and 'fucker le chien' in Canadian French online exchanges. She argues that in France these English words retain some of their expressive and transgressive power and are used in a 'lighthearted way by speakers and writers to take stances that convey some oppositionality, but limited association' (p. 88). In contrast, 'fucker le chien' (literally 'fuck the dog' – meaning 'to waste time' or 'to have difficulty in accomplishing something') has little taboo value in Canadian L1 French: 'rather than thematizing or mobilizing other-languageness, it functions as an integrated (nativized) idiomatic expression in Québécois French' (p. 88). Jaffe speculates that the popularity of 'fuck' in English may obscure its loanword status and its indexical connections with English but it may very well retain its position between mild and very transgressive French swearwords (p. 103).

Hjort (2017) found that 'fuck' in her survey of attitudes towards Finnish swearwords was considered by a majority of the 3002 participants to be a code-switch rather than an established loan, in contrast with Rathje's (2014) finding that almost all of her teenage respondents considered 'fuck' to be a Danish swearword.

Beers Fägersten (2017) reported that Swedish print media are less reticent than their English peers to use English taboo words like 'fuck'. The phrase 'FUCK cancer' was used as the title of a campaign against cancer that had official backing. The choice of the English word might have been motivated by its conciseness, the fact that the construction 'fuck X' is well established, and that Swedish alternatives would have been clumsier. Also, in the Swedish context, this expression was not considered to be conventionally offensive but it was legitimized and standardized.

Zenner, Ruetten, and Devriendt (2017) looked at the use of 882 English swearwords in more than six million tweets from Belgian Dutch and Netherlandic Dutch Twitter users. Their data reveal that 'shit' and 'fuck' are frequently used in both varieties of Dutch. The researchers investigated the creativity in the use of English, ranging from simple insertion, to phraseological swearing (partly translated compound English swearwords), and phraseological swearing used as a construction, so that parts of the construction can be translated or interchanged, sometimes with a pun, which reflects constructional creativity. An example of this is: 'Weer aanslag in de US? There is some serious shit on the marble...' ('Another attack in the US? There is some serious shit on the marble...'). The authors explain that this is a 'literal translation into English of a Dutch expression (er is stront aan de knikker, best translation 'the shit has hit the fan').' (p. 130). Bilingual punning is a much appreciated linguistic activity of bilinguals (Vaid 2006) and when it involves taboo words it "smells like

teen spirit. It roars, ducks, and feints, combining offensiveness and ambiguity” (Dewaele 2017d: 257).

#### **4. Possible causes of differences in emotionality of L1 and LX words**

Pavlenko (2005, 2012) argued that the main difference in emotionality between L1s and LXs comes from the fact that there are differences in affective processing, defined as ‘somatovisceral responses triggered by automatic appraisal of verbal stimuli, which may or may not register as subjective feelings at the level of higher cognition.’ (2012: 409). Affective processing in the L1 is more automatic and is linked to heightened electrodermal reactivity to L1 emotion-laden words. LX users experience decreased automaticity of affective processing ‘which reduces interference effects and lowers electrodermal reactivity to negative emotional stimuli’ (p. 405). This has consequences on the embodiment of the language. The L1(s) feel embodied because of intense affective socialization in early childhood while late bilinguals and LX users process the LX semantically but not affectively. Pavlenko describes affective socialization as ‘a process of integration of phonological forms of words and phrases with information from visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, kinesthetic, and visceral modalities, autobiographical memories, and affect’ (Pavlenko 2012: 421). As a result, words are linked to positive or negative memories while swearwords or taboo words become associated ‘with prohibition and punishment in the process of verbal conditioning’ (p. 421). Pavlenko argues that studies on bilingual autobiographical memory, the auditory effect in affective processing (Harris et al. 2003) and responses to taboo words (Bowers and Pleydell-Pearce 2011) show that in early language acquisition language develops together with autobiographical memory and emotion regulation systems: ‘the languages thus acquire both affective and autobiographical dimensions’ (p. 421). This concurs with Harris et al’s (2006) emotional contexts of learning theory. The joint development of language and affect is less likely to occur in LX acquisition. The main reason is that the language classroom ‘does not provide many opportunities for integration of all sensory modalities and verbal conditioning (other than foreign language anxiety) and thus leads to development of ‘disembodied’ words, used freely by speakers who do not experience their full impact’ (Pavlenko 2012: 421). As a result, the LX may seem more detached to its users. Pavlenko argues that affective processing is automatic in L1(s) (p. 421), while LXs are processed semantically but not affectively (p. 405).

Jończyk, Boutonnet, Musiał, Hoemann and Thierry (2016) found evidence for affective disembodiment in attenuated N400 amplitudes to negative English emotional sentences with congruent and incongruent endings among 19 Polish-English bilinguals who had moved to the UK after puberty. One stimulus was ‘Women find him interesting, because Harry is very romantic / burnt\*’ (p. 170). They did find increased N400<sup>2</sup> for sentences in L1 Polish. This raised the question about the amount of time needed in the LX to acquire affective meaning. The authors conclude that their participants suppressed ‘L2 content embedded in naturalistic L2 sentences when it has negative valence’ (p. 527).

Jończyk (2016) warns against an oversimplification of the issue of affective embodiment in the bilingualism because ‘bilinguals’ language histories differ probably to as much an extent as their affective experiences, and it is extremely difficult to dissect and control these factors in an experimental environment’ (p. 155). He argues in favour of more ecological validity, i.e. not just decontextualized lab experiments. In fact, one could argue that these lab experiments largely confirm the findings obtained through different types of epistemological (etic versus emic) and methodological approaches. Triangulation is the best way to move the field forward.

## 5. Conclusion

Jay (chapter 6, this volume) points out that it would be nice to develop a master list of taboo words and to improve the consistency of the definition of taboo words, which are ‘a very heterogeneous, context and mode-dependent category’. This runs into the immediate difficulty that Jay mentions himself, namely that ‘what is seen as taboo varies not only with time and from person to person but also the situation’ (Stenström 2017: 175). Moreover, the word itself is only part of the picture, the taboo value depends on the use of intensifiers or hedges, by the tone of voice or the facial expression, by emoticons and exclamation marks in written texts). I compared swearwords and taboo words with ‘tiles in a multi-coloured and multi-layered mosaic in indirect light and with persistent areas of darkness’ (Dewaele 2017d: 258). The LX adds another layer of complexity for both speaker and hearer as a foreign accent might create doubts among interlocutors about the intentionality and the pragmatic awareness of the LX user in using that taboo word – which could completely alter the perlocutionary effects of the word. Uncertainty about meaning, offensiveness and appropriateness of taboo words makes LX users vulnerable in social interactions, which is why they tend to refrain from using them, or prefer less offensive ones.

To conclude, it is important that LX users appreciate the fact that LX swearwords and taboo words are truly the linguistic equivalent of heavy medieval flails, and not some rose plastic toy version sold to children at Halloween.

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<sup>1</sup> The use of categories such as that of ‘native speakers’ versus ‘non-native speakers’ implies the inherent inferiority of the later, no matter their degree of proficiency, and the undeniable superiority of the former. Dewaele (2017a) has defended a more holistic categorization that recognizes individuals as learners and users of many languages and uses value-neutral terms. The dichotomy first (L1) versus foreign (LX) users does not imply any level of proficiency and both can be multicompetent users of various L1(s) and of LX(s).

<sup>2</sup> The N400 was caused by a problem with semantic integration.