Speaking the Unspeakable: A Socio-Cultural Analysis of Tabooed Language in Shona Society.

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Abstract

This article discusses tabooed language in Shona, a Bantu language spoken in Zimbabwe. The Shona society, like any other society, has an unwritten code of behavior which spells out acceptable and unacceptable behavior and speech, particularly in the public space so that one's behavior and speech does not cause discomfort to the listeners. Taboos are a linguistic universal; different cultures have categories of words which are not spoken in public but are known to exist. That goes to show that no culture uses language uninhibitedly (Wardhaugh 1998: 236). In the Shona society, there are some topics that are regarded as sacrosanct and are known to exist in the language but are not to be spoken about publicly. However, there are some individuals who may break the code of behavior and use tabooed language. Employing a qualitative approach, the study used interviews, observations and focus group discussions to solicit for information. This article undertakes a socio-cultural analysis of the categories of tabooed language in Shona within the paradigms of cognitive grammar. It is evident that in the Shona society taboo language still holds an important place in as far as everyday communication and interaction is concerned. Euphemisms still remain valid and they are a reflection of the change and dynamism characterizing the Shona society in this contemporary dispensation.

Keywords: taboo, Shona, culture, euphemism

Introduction

Taboos are prohibitions, bans or restrictions imposed by society on certain actions or speech forms which are said to be sacrosanct and not normally performed or uttered in the public space. The breaching of a taboo is believed to result in some misfortune to the doer or speaker. These prohibitions are communicated to children during their socialization process. Chabata and Mavhu (2005: 257) observe that words which fall under the label of taboo language refer to a variety of words which are viewed as obscene, vulgar, impolite, derogatory, and those which refer to the physically, mentally challenged. Chigidi (2009) analyses taboos in relation to the aspect of 'avoidance" rules meant to instill fear in children thereby deterring them from

performing unacceptable actions. What is important to note is that the concept of taboo cannot be restricted to acts and places but also to words which are viewed as unspeakable or sensitive in each situation. In the context of this paper, taboos will be regarded as a class of words and expressions which are considered inappropriate in certain circumstances because they would be sensitive and offensive in their use.

This analysis of taboos in the contemporary setting is very crucial insofar as it affirms the changing nature of society considering the factors that continue to influence the way societies behave. The taste, values, and attitudes of a people continue to change over time. Globalization has been the major driving force of change in most African societies, and the people's use of taboo language has not been spared. This is the reason why this study has been limited to the contemporary Shona society because we envisage that it continues to experience a lot of changes at the cultural level.

In the Shona culture most of the taboo words come from those which are obscene. Obscene words are those which refer to certain parts of the human anatomy as well as their functions. The parts of the body are usually the private parts of the body which must do with sex and excretion, whose exposure in public is also regarded as taboo. In other cultures, the world over, taboo words are also largely constituted by most of the areas mentioned above, with many of the words being those which are obscene and having to do with the subject of sex and certain body functions like excretion. In the Western culture for example as noted by Trudgill (1974:27) and Wardhaugh (1998: 234) that the most tabooed subjects have to do with sex, death, excretion, bodily functions, religious matters and politics.

Ullman (1962) gives typologies of the taboos that are found in language. The first type of taboo words as postulated by Ullman are what he refers to as taboos of fear. This group of words includes reference to the devil, God and certain animals such as lions, bears and tigers. In the Shona culture reference to snakes, bats and hyenas instills fear in people, particularly children. These animals are also associated with witchcraft. In some cultures, some people keep snakes in their homes as a hobby but to the Shona culture one would be immediately labeled a witch if one were to rear snakes. Ullman also notes that people avoid mentioning certain words or certain things directly as they may be offensive to some people. He refers to these as taboos of delicacy. For example, topics such as death, disease, disability, criminal acts. Instead of mentioning them directly, people resort to using euphemisms. Taboos of propriety are the other category that Ullman refers to. Propriety involves decency, decorum, appropriateness, hence one gauges what they say according to whether it is appropriate within a context. Taboos of

propriety include topics on sex, certain body parts, bodily functions and swearing. For these words too, speakers make use of euphemisms. These categories of taboos that this article will refer to are the taboos of delicacy and propriety.

Socialization of children plays a crucial role in society in that it is during the socialization process that children are taught the norms of society and culture. As such, children grow up knowing acceptable and unacceptable forms of behavior and speech. The failure to adhere to society's rules and expectations would lead elders to question whether "*munhu iyeye akazvarwa chembere dzaenda kudoro*" loosely translated: one's behavior is wayward and appears to be devoid of parental or adult guidance and counsel. Wardhaugh (ibid) observes that some people violate the taboos as a way of showing "their own freedom from such social constraints or to expose the taboos as irrational and unjustified".

In Zimbabwe's urban areas, and particularly in Harare, the capital city, commuter omnibus touts have come to be associated with the use of taboo language especially obscene and vulgar words largely because of their rowdy behavior and lack of respect towards other members of society. Touting is an illegal form of work which involves informal and unorthodox ways of convincing commuters to board public transport. The stiff competition between the touts normally leads to anger and frustration and rampant use of taboo language in the form of swearing. The other social group that is akin to use a lot of vulgar language are vendors, market women (*vakadzi vemusika*) and prostititutes. These uncomely behaviors at times surmount to the infringement of the rights of those within hearing range. While it is believed that in most societies men are likely to use taboo language more than women Jay (2000), it is important to stress that also in some circumstances women find themselves swearing and cursing quite a lot.

Discussions with peers revealed that people use tabooed language because of several social situations. One such scenario is uncontrolled anger and emotion especially in heated arguments. In such a situation the aggrieved party will use tabooed language to insult the other person.

Taboos and the Shona Cultural Space

The issue of taboos is very much guided and influenced by a people's culture. Ipso facto, it is a community or society which decides when a word is dirty or clean, even in a situation where two countries share the same language they are likely to have different tabooed words. Gao (2013:2311) notes that, "peoples of different countries do not agree totally on what taboos are. Acts of human excretion and sexual intercourse are to be avoided in polite conversation. Age

and salary should be avoided in English conversation. In China, acts of human excretion and sexual intercourse are also taboo, but the Chinese are more tolerant in talking about age and salary" Hence, Akmajian (2001) says what counts as taboo language is something defined by culture and not anything inherent in the culture, in other words, no word is inherently good or bad but it is a people's attitude, perception and meaning given to a certain word that creates the taboo nature in that word. It is also imperative to highlight that taboo terms are also affected from a language or linguistic point that is there may be the case of variations at the dialect level such that some words may be taboo in one dialect but not in others. For example, in the case of Shona the researchers discovered that in the Korekore variety the term *kunyenga* (to court a girl) is obscene because it explicitly refers to sexual intercourse whereas in the other varieties the term refers to the process of courtship. As a result, when people are discussing the subject of courtship in the presence of a Korekore speaker, they will make every effort to avoid the term *kunyenga* and use the more neutral term *kupfimba* or *kutsvetsva* (to court a girl).

It is evident from previous researches in ethnolinguistics that when it comes to language use, most cultures the world over have certain words in their vocabularies which they have tagged as taboo. This implies that these words are to be avoided or forbidden to be used in certain situations. The Shona people are no exception as they also have a long list of words which they regard as taboo. The exercise of placing certain words under the taboo tag arises from the fact that the Shona people do realize the potency of words and their capacity to cause harm and embarrassment in situations of interaction. As a realization of this, cultural restrictions enforce the Shona people to observe and note the words they use when they interact amongst themselves. Hence, Pfukwa (2001: 26-27) maintains that learning to speak in the Shona society like in any other community involves the recognition of the potency of the spoken word and linguistic avoidance in certain situations. This is the reason why in the Shona culture people who fail to observe taboo word restrictions are usually referred to as "*vanhu vasina ganda kumeso*" (lit. people with no skin on their face = people who do not respect or have no consideration for their way of talking or using language such that they tend to always cause shame or harm with their careless use of language). This observation implies that these people do not observe the cultural rules concerning the use of taboo words in the Shona culture and such acts lead to these people losing their self-image and tarnishing the communal image as a whole. Yankah (1998: 15) echoes similar sentiments when he says that, "Both in traditional and modern society compliance with verbal taboos is part of the ethnography of communication for society places certain words under strict verbal censorship".

It is also vital to stress the importance of situation and context when dealing with the issue of taboo language as it depends on these two. According to Mohsen (2011:16), speakers in a language realize the taboo level of a word mainly through its connotations and the appropriateness of a word to be uttered in a situation. This means that for a word to be deemed as offensive it will have been used in an inappropriate situation because people tend to associate certain words with certain situations. If a word or term is used in the appropriate situation then there is no taboo which has been breached. For example, in the Shona society, it is not proper for a son in-law to talk about sex-related matters with his mother in-law because of the cultural distance that must be observed between them. However, it would be appropriate to talk about the same topics with his wife or wife's sister because society allows it. Besides the issue of situation as a determinant of the level of offensiveness there are other factors which come into play such as the speaker and listener relationship and the purpose of the conversation. Tabooed topics in Shona include sex, sexual organs, illness, disability, death, and certain animals and reptiles.

The Penguin Dictionary of Languages defines euphemisms as the use of vague or indirect expressions in the place of one which is thought to be unpleasant, embarrassing or offensive. Euphemisms are typically used to replace expressions to do with death, sexual activity and other bodily functions. According to Wardhaugh (1986:234), "taboo words and expressions are less obvious in society than euphemisms which come about because of dressing up certain areas in life to make them more presentable". As elaborated by Wardhaugh, it is euphemism which most societies use in the place of taboo words. This is inspired by the fact that cultures have words which are unspeakable in some situations, so to talk about the unspeakable euphemism is employed. From the cultural perspective of the Shona, Mpofu and Mangoya (2005: 129) state that:

> Euphemism is the replacement of a term seen as less refined or too direct by a more refined or less direct term. This is mostly evident when it comes to the naming of private parts of the body and any biological functions associated with them. Mentioning them and describing their functions is considered to be highly obscene in Shona culture so that alternative descriptions for them have been created in an effort to diminish the obscenity which they are deemed to carry.

However, linguistic norms may change. For instance, many changes continue to take place in the African culture through rapid globalization and technological improvements starting from home and to all other aspects of life. New contexts like the school, college and the work place have arisen in the contemporary setup all these have a bearing on the nature and significance of taboo language. In the school setup for example, children continue to be exposed to taboo subjects through learning. They come across topics such as sex and death, because they are in a school setup they are obliged to talk about such topics openly. In such cases they cannot be charged for breaking verbal taboos because the situation and context permits them to talk about such taboo subjects. The electronic media at times talks about taboo subjects but these will be efforts to educate the people about HIV/AIDS and in this case the rules to be observed when it comes to the use of taboo words or topics will be overlooked because of the situation or context at hand. Because of these developments in society, issues that once belonged to the private space have now been brought into the public space.

Theoretical Foundation

The analysis of taboos in Shona will be informed by cognitive grammar as postulated by Langacker (1987, 2008). Langacker's premise is that, meaning is the central component and that meaning can be equated to the conceptualization of phenomena. According to the theory of cognition, one of the main purposes of language is to convey meaning and the meaning of a word can be conceptualized within more than one domain. A word or term can assume many different meanings depending on how it is construed and interpreted in the given situation. Closely related to this is that in the understanding of taboo language no word is inherently good or bad but it is the connotation which is given to the word by a people that makes it good or bad obviously through the way the people or the society have conceptualized the word. It is from this view that we can attempt to understand how the Shona people understand and implement the concept of taboo language in their society. From the cognitive grammar perspective, it is important to highlight that the very concept of taboo is also a result of cognition in the sense that though the idea of taboo language is a universal phenomenon it does not necessarily mean that in all these cultures they have the same taboo terminology but the terms differ because in different societies the people will also have different conceptualizations of the social environments in which they live. The taboo terms of the Shona people to be analysed in this paper are reflective of this view of meaning. This analysis will be made using some of the major underlying ideas in the theory of cognitive language such as meaning, perception, mental spaces and conceptualization.

Furthermore, meaning can be understood under two types, that is, conceptual and associative meaning. Conceptual meaning refers to the definition of a word; associative meaning is about the individual mental understanding of the speaker. It is this type of meaning which is of interest in this analysis because it comes about because of what are termed image schemas which according to Langacker (2008:32) are schematic patterns of activity abstracted from everyday experience. In line with these, individuals have the capacity to interpret social scenes differently because in their minds they have different image schemas.

Methodology

The research used the qualitative research methodology. The data collection tools were in the form of interviews, observations, focus group discussions. The study solicited for information from 25 participants, all who were drawn from Harare. The participants were purposively selected because they had the information which was important to the study. Respondents involved the elderly, kombi touts, high school and college students and commercial sex workers. All were drawn from Harare because the city is made up of people drawn from the diverse cultural backgrounds which make up the Shona people. Issues of confidentiality and informed consent were stressed on before, during and after data collection exercise since the subject at hand was sensitive.

Categories of taboo words in Shona

Since there are no universal norms guiding the categorizing and use of taboo words, it becomes imperative that we come up with a categorizing of taboo words from a Shona perspective. As mentioned earlier on, in the Shona culture tabooed words come from such subjects as sex, death, certain behavior, certain diseases and also conditions like physical and mental impairment. It is from these areas from which the following categories can be drawn. In the Shona society, taboo words can be categorized as follows: sex, obscenities, ethnic and racial insults, swear words, illness and death.

Obscenities

According to Chabata and Mavhu (2002) in Shona many of the taboo words are those that are obscene. Landau (1984:183) defines obscenity as, "Any reference to the bodily functions that gives anyone a certain emotional reaction, that of 'fearful thrill' in seeing, doing or speaking the forbidden. Thus, it is the existence of the ban or taboo that creates the obscenity". Obscene

words are those that refer to certain parts of the human body as well as their functions. The list of obscene words also includes words referring to bodily functions and processes like *mama* (defecate), *sura* (fart) and *tunda* (ejaculate/urinate).

The use of obscene words is strictly restricted according to Shona cultural norms. In normal situations of interaction, the words are not used. Mentioning of such words in public or polite company leads to public shame and ridicule on the part of the user. Jay (1996) argues that in the case of obscenity it is not only about restricting what people say but also protecting the listeners from harmful speech. Thus, the Shona people always insist on observing the rules concerning taboo word use in situations of verbal interaction. All words in this category are referred to as '*zvinyadzi*'. In practical situations these obscene words are substituted with their euphemistic equivalents to an extent that it is the euphemistic words which are very popular in use. In the Shona speech communities, you will hear people say for instance *ndichamboenda kunozvibatsira* (lit. I am going to help myself = meaning going to excrete). About sexual intercourse euphemistic expressions are used such as *vakarara vese* (they slept together); *vakasangana;* (they met)*,* both referring to the fact that the act of sexual intercourse was performed. In the case of the private parts depending on the age of the speaker indirect terms are applied for example genital parts are normally referred to as *nhengo dzemudzimai* (female genital organs) *or nhengo dzababa* (male genital organs). Both male and female organs are also referred to as *chinhu* (thing); while the male organ is referred to specifically as *chombo* (weapon). Mpofu and Mangoya (2005: 130) refer to the following euphemisms for the female and male genitalia: *sikarudzi* (creator of a tribe), *mukana* (passage = vagina), *kunzira* (way = vagina), *mhuka* (animal = penis), *chirombo* (a big thing = penis), *mbonausiku* (a thing that sees at night = penis). The youth coin their own terminology and refer to the female genitalia as *pakati* (in the middle).

Ethnic and Racial Insults

Insulting words are terms and expressions used by people with the intention of hurting the feelings of other people. Ethnic or racial slurs are mainly influenced by racism, Deng (1980:100) defines racism as, "the belief that some human races are inherently inferior to others, racist language is that which shows a bias against racial or ethnic groups; it is a language that degrades or belittles them". These terms are usually offensive and are meant to demean or degrade other people Montagu (1967). In other words, the insulting terms can also be derogatory in nature, the insults have impact because they denote real or created negative characteristics of the targeted victim and also that there is lack of respect for others on the part

of the speaker. The words vary in the impact they have on the intended target, some insulting words are mild in offense while others are very severe. This all depends on the context or situation and the intended target. For example, the term '*mabhoyi*' (boys) is an insulting term which owes its origin to the colonial days and was mostly used by whites as a term of reference for the Africans. Largely influenced by racism, Europeans viewed Africans as inferior physically and mentally that their mental capacity was the same as that of small children, small boys in other words. Gao (2013) also asserts that in the 17th century the British fought very much with the Dutch such that in English vocabulary the word Dutch had a derogatory sense in most of its usages. The term '*mabhoyi*' grew in prominence and was also absorbed into the Shona lexicon as an insulting term. What is important to note is that Africans can use the term amongst themselves without creating much offence or sensitivity against each other, no wonder why the statement **'*mabhoyi munonetsa'*** (Africans you are problem) is perceived as normal amongst the Shona people. However, if the term is used by a non-Shona about the Shona it becomes an open insult especially if the term is used by a European. The same applies to the term "nigger" which African Americans can use with no racial connotations amongst themselves but becomes highly offensive if uttered by a white person in whatever context.

The term Bantu as used in South Africa is also a good example to illustrate insults at a racial level. It was made popular during the apartheid era when Africans were socially and politically disadvantaged and were deemed as inferior by the whites the term had negative connotations in relation to the African people just like the term nigger in America with reference to the black people. As a result, Africans were offended to be referred to as the Bantu people because in their conceptualization of the social reality the term was intended for abuse so it was offensive even though the term is African in origin.

Hostility and stereotyping which is created amongst the ethnic groups are mostly the contributing factors since some societies look down upon others because of the failure to understand and appreciate the other group's culture. Mashiri (2005) observes that the exchange of ethnic labels is very much entrenched in the languages of the ethnic groups of Zimbabwe. The Zezuru, Karanga, Korekore and Manyika make up the ethnic groups which constitute the Shona people of Zimbabwe, amongst these groups are labels which clearly show the resentment and contempt for example the Karanga are referred to as '*MaVhitori*' (people from Fort Victoria) or '*vana wezhira* (Karanga people from Masvingo); those from the Manyika group are called or referred to as '*vanaWasu*' (people from Mutare). Mashiri (2005:3) also highlights that within the Zimbabwean context the different ethnic groups have created certain stereotypes

towards one another which portray the Manyika as hypocritical while the Karanga are said to be arrogant and pompous. The other ethnic group though outside the scope of this research is also a good example of ethnic slurs in the case of the Zimbabwean context. The Ndebele were referred to as '*madzviti*' (dissidents or ruthless people) because of their perceived ruthless nature way back in history as they moved into present day Zimbabwe led by their leader Mzilikazi. The Shona tribes could not match the Ndebele military prowess and they were subsequently conquered, thus the term *madzviti* was coined by the Shona to show their resentment of the Ndebele people. Similarly, the Ndebele also have insulting terms directed towards the Shona people like '*Amasvina*' (dirty people).

Ethnic slurs are also experienced between the Shona people and other ethnic groups from other countries especially from Malawi, Zambia and Mozambique. The civil war in Mozambique in the 1980s resulted in most of its citizens fleeing to seek refuge in Zimbabwe. The people of Zimbabwe created derogatory terms to refer to the Mozambicans whom they looked down upon and resented. Chabata and Mavhu (2002) cite the term '*mukarushu*' (person of Mozambican origin) for Mozambican immigrants. The other less formal term used to refer to a person of Mozambican origin is *muMosikeni*.

In the case of the people from Malawi and Zambia, the ethnic slurs are well documented arising from the time of colonialism and the federation of the then Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland (1953-1963). Large groups of people migrated to Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) in search of work on the farms and industries. Their desperate situation led them to take up work mostly in the mines and the farms, jobs which were resented by the locals. It is from these situations that demeaning terms were created to refer to the people from Malawi and Zambia, thus we have terms like *Mabhurandaya* (people from Blantyre)*, Mabwidi* (stupid, homeless people) and *Mabvakure* (people who came from faraway lands). These terms have become very much embedded in the lexicon of the Shona people and they always use them to insult the people originally from Malawi and Zambia. It is also important to note that amongst these ethnic slurs there are those which are very severe like '*mabwidi*' and '*mateeranjanji*' (those who followed the railway line when coming from Malawi) while the other terms are mild that the referents are not usually bothered, like *Machawa, Manyanja* and *Marudzi* or *Vanhu vechirudzi* (foreigners).

Swear Words

Swearing involves the use of obscene, rude and blasphemous language to show anger frustration emotion or even excitement. It has been revealed in practice that people do not only swear because they are angry or emotional but that they may be excited (Jay 2000). Montagu (1967) categorizes swearing into the following: abusive, durative, interjectional and objurgatory. This implies that swearing can be in different forms depending on the situation and context involved and the intention of the swearing because it is not always abusive but that swear terms can be used to add emphasis or in some cases as they assume the form of expletives. For instance, in Shona there are terms like "*wamama*" (serves you right). The term *kumama* (to excrete) is a tabooed word whose euphemistic equivalent is *kuita tsvina* (to excrete). The more sombre term would be *wakaura!* (serves you right!). According to McEnery in Jay (2009:156) swearing is determined by social rank and status. He argues that other social groups swear a lot than others, McEnery also notes that swearing is well documented in the lexicon of social groups like college students and soldiers while in people of higher status in society swearing is not very popular. In the Shona context, swearing using expletives denotes lack of social etiquette and decorum.

Some of the common swear words found in the Shona lexica include:

futseke   get away

mboko   stupid, idiot

hure   bitch, prostitute

nzenza   over-laughing idiot

rombe   good-for-nothing idiot, never do well

Apart   from the fact that in the Shona culture and other cultures taboo words are mostly associated with sex, it also important to note that there is a close correlation between the taboo concept and the taboo word used to describe the concept. In other words, when an act is considered taboo, the words describing the act become taboo. The words cited in this section fit into Ullman's category of taboos of delicacy. It is taboo to swear in public in Shona; let alone to refer to someone to their face and in public as *hure* (prostitute), *nzenza* (over laughing idiot) or *rombe* (never do well). Someone may think it and believe it but will not utter to the affected person. The Shona people also strongly believe in *munyama* (bad luck) and thus avoid insulting others because of the fear of bringing ill fortune upon themselves.

Cognitive grammar places emphasis on the interrelationship between the use of language and the social context and environment. As such, context dictates what is said or not said between people because if one says the wrong thing in the wrong context, he/she would be viewed with scorn.

New environments, contexts and cognitions have been created among the people largely because of new technology and processes like urbanization. This results in the construing of language differently amongst the people for example certain words mean different things to the same people while the word (*mutsetse*) seems normal to the elderly in the Shona society simply meaning a straight line, to the youth the word is unspeakable because to them it refers directly to the female sexual organ, the vagina. The word, according to the perception of the youth is obscene and its use should be restricted and controlled to save one's self image from public embarrassment and societal ridicule because of the use of taboo words in the wrong situations.

Illness and Death

In the Shona society, like in many other cultures, death is viewed as a very sensitive and emotional issue which people are not very comfortable to talk of. The Shona people as a result do not take or talk about matters of death lightly. Certain illnesses in the Shona society are also viewed as unspeakable especially if one has succumbed to the HIV/AIDS virus or is mentally challenged. The people find it very difficult to talk about such illnesses in situations of normal interaction because the words naming the diseases or the illnesses are labeled as taboo words which must be avoided when making conversations with other members of the society. Hence Mashiri, Mawomo and Tom (2002:221) say that, "Shona people consider matters relating to sex, death, illness or other misfortune as taboo or unspeakable". Examples of euphemisms referring to death are the following:

atisiya	he/she has left us
apfuura	he/she has passed on
aenda	he/she has gone
ashayika	he/she cannot be found or is lost
nhingi hakusisina	so and so is no more

When it comes to matters of illness the Shona people also take heed not to talk openly or directly about certain diseases like HIV/AIDS, they realize the need to protect the self-image of the sick and other members of the society who may be affected directly or indirectly. This

move stems from the Shona people's worldview which puts emphasis on the need to promote harmony amongst members of the Shona society, hence Mashiri, Mawomo and Tom (2002:221) stress that, "The Shona create and use numerous euphemism, metaphors, colloquial expressions and slang for naming HIV/AIDS or referring to its consequences since they perceive the acronym HIV/AIDS as too direct, unsettling and face threatening". The other strategy used in language to avoid unpleasant topics is the use of metonymy as propounded by cognitive grammar which entails the use of another word or concept associated in meaning to the word or concept being avoided. The Shona lexicon as a result carries a lot of terms and expressions which refer to the illness in a more indirect way such words include the following those which refer to the actual symptoms and also directly to the disease:

chirwere   the disease (in this case referring to HIV/AIDS)

zvamazuva ano   a disease which has become common these days

shuramatongo   a devastating illness which has destroyed families

chakapedzambudzi   a pandemic which wipes out people in large numbers

mukondombera   a pandemic which wipes out people in large numbers

The examples above are examples of metonymy in that the terms used to refer to the HIV pandemic are words that are associated with the phenomenon with some being metaphorical in meaning.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to discuss taboos in Shona and has shown the categories of words that are socially avoided in conversation by the society. Such tabooed topics as has been shown, if they need to be spoken about, are only referred to by means of euphemisms which lighten the burden of using the more direct and offensive term. Chigidi (2009: 184) laments the demise of taboos in society brought about by changes in culture, education and the socialization of children. The education system nowadays teaches young people to have a questioning and critical mind, whereas the social education system of past generations did not encourage children to question their elders. The study also noted the continued centrality of euphemisms in taboo language even though culture and language continue to change new euphemisms also being created to keep in line with the change which the Shona society is undergoing. The youths for instance are also creating their own euphemisms with reference to tabooed subjects and words.

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