



**ANALYSIS OF PEOPLE’S OPINIONS ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF
THE LINGUISTIC TABOOS IN YORUBA LANGUAGE USAGE IN
SOUTHWESTERN NIGERIA**

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Abstract

‘Eewo’ or ‘taboo’ comprises of a combination of the Yoruba unwritten constitutions that control the people’s socio-cultural, socio-economic, political and religious beliefs., this paper examines the two types of this philosophical and social-cultural concepts in Yoruba land by carrying out an analysis of linguistic taboos in Yorubaland with a specific reference to Southwestern Nigeria. Two hundred and fifty questionnaires were administered among Yoruba youths and adults in six institutions of higher learning in Southwestern Nigeria. The result showed that linguistic taboo were observed in Yoruba language usage to guide against the use of vulgar language among youths, to be polite in speech, to observe the socio-cultural beliefs among the Yoruba, and to be friendly in speech. It was also discovered that understanding the use and usage of these linguistic taboos hinges on the internalising the social, cognitive and cultural common grounds among the participants. The theoretical framework for the study was Dell Hymes (1964) concept of ‘Ethnography of Speech while simple percentage statistical tool was used in analysing the data.

Key words: Linguistic taboo, Yoruba language usage, Yoruba cosmology. Meaning negotiation, meaning interpretation.

Introduction

Human existence is guided by different socio-cultural and philosophical postulations that guide people's beliefs, values and world views. Yoruba people of Southwestern Nigeria are controlled by different socio-cultural beliefs and such beliefs are guided by different 'unwritten laws' or 'constitutions'. 'Eewo or 'taboos' are unwritten laws that control the socio-cultural, economic and political systems of the Yorubas. According to Olajubu (1997,p.6), taboos can be described as the 'unwritten, constitutions' that state the 'don'ts of Yoruba people in the world. The Yoruba people live in the Southwestern Nigeria as well as in Togo, Benin Republic, Brazil, Cuba as well as Trinidad and Tobago (Owolabi, 1990; Olajubu 1997). Although the ancestral home of this people is in Ile-Ife, the scramble and partition for West Africa colonies by the Dutch, British and French had made the descendants of Onipopo and Onisabe to spread to Togo, and Benin Republics where they speak different varieties of Yoruba language. Besides, there are Yorubas in the Diaspora (in Cuba, Brazil, Trinidad and Tobago and some other Latin American nations, (Adebileje, 2016; Awoniyi, 1978). In all these areas, the people often use and believe in both the cultural and linguistic taboos (or eewo). This paper therefore attempts to examine the different perceptions or opinions of people on the use and usage of linguistic taboos in the Yoruba language usage (Adebileje, 2012). The attempt is to find out the pedagogic and social implications of the use of this concept in the Yoruba language.

Meaning, types and use of eewo (or taboo) in Yoruba Language Usage

Eewos or taboos abounds in Yoruba language. They guide the religious, socio-political and socio-economic life of the Yorubas,(Owolabi,1990). For instance,there is a taboo to announce the death of a king in Yorubaland by saying 'Oba ti ku'. Instead, the Yoruba people will say 'Oba ti wo aja' or ' the

king has climbed the ceiling.” The significance of this statement is the Yoruba cosmological belief in the three worlds: (i) world of the living, (ii) world of the dead or ancestors and (iii) world of the unborn.

According to Soyinka (1976) in *Myth, Literature and African World*, Yoruba people believe in the supreme being, lesser gods and the efficacy of the existence of ancestral powers. This makes the Yorubas to be guided by different ‘unwritten constitution’ called taboos or ‘eewo’. There are different ancestral taboos, family taboos, clan or lineage taboos, town taboos, etc in Yoruba land. For instance, it is a taboo for people in Ondo town to eat big rat (okete). It is a taboo to sell pounded yam or groundnut in Owu Kuta, a town that is very close to Iwo in Osun State. All these are examples of town taboos in Yoruba land. Different lineages in Yoruba land have their sacred animals (or totems) which are forbidden or taboo for them to eat. For instance, the Alapa lineage or clan in Yoruba land must not eat snake, the Oluoje lineage must not eat a wood pecker (eye ega) because it ani mals are totem to them. Hence, it is a taboo for Oluoje lineage in Yoruba land to eat or kill ‘eye ega’ or wood pecker (Owolabi 1990, p. 12).

Also, worshipers of OOsa Aala must not drink palm wine. It is a taboo for them to drink palm wine. Besides, it is a taboo to put ‘adi’ on *esu* shrine. It is also a taboo for anybody in dThe Elesus must not eat adi. It is a taboo for them to eat it. The Oloya worshippers in Yoruba land must not eat *agbo* (ram); while Olosun worshippers must not drink *oka baba pap* (guinea corn pap). *Onisango* worshippers must not eat *luuru stew*. It is a taboo for them (**source: oral interview carried out at Alaafin’s and Ooni’s palaces**).

There are two types of taboos or eewo in Yoruba land: (i) the cultural taboos and (ii) the linguistic taboos. The cultural taboos explain the Yoruba socio-cultural and cosmological beliefs. They also explain how Yorubas worship their ancestral fathers and divinities. For instance, each divinity like *Oya*, *Ogun*, *Sango*, *Sanponna*, *Esu* etc has its taboos. For example, the *Ogun* worshippers must not eat cricket or ire. It is a taboo for them to do so. Hence, it is a taboo to take ire or cricket to Ile-Aro or *Agbede* (i.e the forge or hearth; where metals are heated and shaped before hammering them). There is a general belief that

when crickets are taken to Ile Aro (or the forge), there will be poor production at the forge (**Source: Oral interview of blacksmiths of some blacksmiths at Ogbomoso**).

There are also the linguistic taboos among the Yorubas. The linguistic taboos are taboos which forbid the use of some lexical patterns or words in Yoruba language usage. It has been observed that scanty study exists on the significance of linguistic taboos to Yoruba language.

This paper therefore examines the meaning and significance of the linguistic taboos in the Yoruba language usage.

Significance of the Study

This paper attempts to study the significance of the linguistic taboos in the Yoruba language usage. This is as a result of the fact that scanty study exists on this topic. Apart from Owolabi (1990) that studies 'eewo' or 'taboos' in Yoruba language, Olajubu (1997) that examines the effects of taboos on the health of African women with a specific reference to the Yoruba women, Osei (2006) that works on the values of African taboos for biodiversity and sustainable development and Adebileje (2012) that carries out the socio-cultural and attitudinal study of selected Yoruba taboos, scanty studies exist on the significances of the linguistic taboos in the Yoruba language usage. This paper therefore attempts to fill this existing gap in the research in the Yoruba language usage.

Existing Studies on the Use of Taboos in Yoruba language.

Oludare Olajubu (1997) studies the effects of taboos on health of Yoruba women. According to Olajubu (1997), some of the taboos usage in the Yoruba society are designed to protect the health of women. For example, there is a taboo that pregnant women should not walk out at night or under the shining light of the sun. This taboo is used to protect both the child inside the womb of the pregnant woman and the mother. There is a general belief that there exists the danger of being attacked by the evil spirits when a pregnant woman walks out in the night. (Olajubu 1997). According to Olajubu (1997), there also exists

a taboo that pregnant woman in Yoruba land must not eat either a snail or snake meat. The Yorubas believe that when pregnant women eat snail, their children's mouth will be full of saliva after delivery. The Yorubas use taboos to protect their children and wives. Owolabi (1997) examines different clan and family taboos in Yoruba land. According to him, most clan taboos or lineage taboos in Yoruba land reflect the people's belief in ancestral worship, beliefs in gods or divinities, beliefs in the Supreme Being, as well as beliefs in charms and medicines. Adebileje (2012) studies the relation between Yoruba culture and the use of taboos. According to Adebileje (2012), taboos usage in Yorubaland is often associated with the people's mode of living such as dressing, family life, religion, beliefs, culture, occupation, etc. Also, Adeleye (2020) studies the eewo or taboos in Yoruba culture. According to Adeleye (2020), the concept of 'Eewo' or Taboo is an implicit prohibition on something based on the cultural sense that it is excessively repulsive or too sacred for ordinary people. For example, it is a taboo for Yoruba women to watch Oro cult. It is also a taboo for women to watch *Oloolu* masquerade at Ibadan. It is also a taboo for women to watch 'Agan' cult in Yoruba land. Any Yoruba woman that contravenes these taboos will die. Hence, the ancestral cultures of the Yorubas are often guarded with 'eewo' or taboos to preserve their sanctity and sacredness (Adeleye 2020; Olajubu 1997).

Theoretical Perspective

The analysis of data in this study was hinged on the theoretical focus of Dell Hymes (1964) Ethnography of speech. Hymes (1964) discusses about 'Who speaks what, to who and how? According to Hymes (1964), to be able to understand a text, one must be able to understand the participants' mutual contextual beliefs or common grounds in the discourse. Hymes' (1964) Ethnography of speech explains that the meaning construction, meaning negotiation and meaning interpretation of any discourse or text in language is based on the understanding of "who speaks what, to who, and how?" in the language used in the text, For instance, for women to be able to greet people who are bereaved in the Yoruba language, the person must have understood

how to use the Yoruba language in different social and cultural contexts. Also, to be able to understand the use of taboo in Yoruba language, the person must have proper understanding of not only the Yoruba socio-cultural cosmology, but must also have a proper understanding of the Yoruba language usage. This is what Dell Hymes (1964) ethnography of speech entails. This theory is relevant in understanding and interpreting the philosophy and concept of 'eewo' or taboo in the Yoruba language usage.

Methodology

The method used in gathering the data was through questionnaires administered among 5 randomly selected Yoruba language teachers and 180 randomly sampled students in 18 purposively sampled secondary schools from six states of Southwestern Nigeria. The schools selected were Oyemeku Grammar School, Ado-Ekiti; Christ Schools Ado-Ekiti; Ikere Grammar School, Ikere-Ekiti; Oke-Igbo Grammar School, Oke-Igbo; St. Monica's Grammar School, Ondo; Ondo Boys High School, Ondo; Ibadan Grammar School, Ibadan; Ladigbolu Grammar School, Oyo; Ogbomoso Girls' High School, Ogbomoso; Abeokuta Grammar School, Abeokuta; Orimolusi College, Ijebu-Ode; Anglican Grammar School, Abeokuta; Muslim Grammar School, Modakeke; Luther King's College, Ile-Ogbo; Origbo Community Grammar School, Ipetumodu; CMS Grammar School, Bariga; Dairy Grammar School, Agege and Muslim Grammar School, Ikorodu.

Three Yoruba language teachers were randomly selected from each of these schools. The method used in administering questionnaire were through a personal contact made to some of these schools and through the contact made with these teachers in an annual conference of Egbe Akomolede Yoruba. Simple percentage statistical tool was used in the analysis of data gathered for this study. The analysis of data for this study was hinged on the theoretical base of Dell Hymes' ethnography of speech. Besides, oral interview was conducted in the palaces of Alaafin of Oyo, Onjo of Okeho, Shoun of Ogbomoso and Olu of Ile Igbo to ask for the meaning and significances of 'eewo' from the palace chiefs.

Data Analysis

The following is the analysis of people's opinions in the use of linguistic taboos in Yoruba language expressions.

Fig 1: Analysis of Yoruba teachers to questionnaires administered to elicit response on their opinions on the use of linguistic taboos in Yoruba language.

S/N	VARIABLES	SA	A	N	SD	D
1	Use of linguistic taboos in Yoruba language helps instills moral on people in Yoruba land.	36 (66.7%)	10 (19%)	2 (3.7%)	2 (3.7%)	4 (7.4%)
2	Use of linguistic taboos helps preserve the sacredness of ancestral worship in Yoruba land.	34 (63%)	12 (22.2%)	02 (3.7%)	02 (3.7%)	04 (7.4%)
3	Use of linguistic taboos has nothing to do with neither the sanctity and sacredness of ancestral worship nor cultural beliefs in Yoruba land.	02 (3.7%)	04 (7.4%)	02 (3.7%)	34 (63%)	12 (22.2%)
4	Use of linguistic taboos in Yoruba language has nothing to do with	02 (3.7%)	02 (3.7%)	02 (3.7%)	35 (66.7%)	12 (22.2%)

	the uplift-ment of moral among youths in Yoruba land.					
5	Use of linguistic taboos in Yoruba language helps in discouraging the use of vulgar expressions among youths and adults in Yoruba land.	40 (74.1%)	10 (19%)	01 (1.9%)	02 (3.7%)	01 (1.9%)
6	Use of linguistic taboos in Yoruba language helps preserves the sacredness of ancestral cults and socio-cultural beliefs in Yoruba land.	36 (66.7%)	10 (19%)	02 (3.7%)	02 (3.7%)	04 (7.4%)
7	Lack of usage of linguistic taboos in the Yoruba language has led to moral degradation among youths in the contemporary Yoruba society.	38 (70.4%)	08 (14.9%)	04 (7.4%)	02 (3.7%)	02 (3.7%)
8	The use of the linguistic taboos	34 (63%)	12 (22.2%)	02 (3.7%)	04 (7.4%)	02 (3.7%)

	should be included in the Yoruba language curriculum in the Southwestern Nigerian Secondary Schools.					
9	The youths in the Southwestern Nigerian Society should be properly educated on the significance of linguistic taboos in Yoruba language usage.	36 (66.7%)	08 (14.8%)	04 (7.4%)	02 (3.7%)	02 (3.7%)

Source: Result of the analysis of questionnaires.

;From ‘Fig 1’ above, it can be deduced that the use of linguistic taboos helps preserve the sacredness of Yoruba ancestral worship. The analysis of data revealed that 63% of the Teachers’ – respondents strongly agreed with this, 22.2% of them agreed while 7.4% disagreed. Also, the results of the data analysis in ‘fig 1’ above reflected that many (66.7%) of the respondents strongly agreed that the use of the linguistic taboos in the Yoruba language usage improves morals among youths in Yoruba land. Besides, 66.7% of the respondents believed that the use of the linguistic taboos in Yoruba language helps preserves the sacredness of Yoruba ancestral cults and socio-cultural beliefs. In the same vein, 63% of the respondents strongly agreed that the teaching of the use of linguistic taboos in Yoruba language should be included in the school curriculum of the Southwestern Nigerian Secondary Schools.

Fig 2: Analysis of Students' Responses to questionnaires administered on the significances of the use of linguistic taboos in Yoruba language.

S/N	Variables	SA	A	N	SD	D
1	Linguistic taboo usage in Yoruba language helps develops morals among youths.	98 (54.4%)	74 (41.1%)	02 (1.1%)	02 (1.1%)	04 (2.2%)
2	Linguistic taboo usage in Yoruba language helps preserves the sacredness of ancestral worship among the Yorubas,	96 (53.3%)	76 (42.2%)	02 (1.1%)	04 (2.2%)	02 (1.1%)
3	Linguistic taboo usage in Yoruba language has nothing to do with neither the sanctity and sacredness of ancestral worship nor cultural beliefs among the Yorubas.	02 (1.1%)	04 (2.2%)	02 (1.1%)	98 (54.4%)	74 (41.1%)
4	Linguistic taboo usage in Yoruba language does not help develop moral among youths in Yoruba land.	04 (2.2%)	02 (1.1%)	02 (1.1%)	96 (53.3%)	76 (42.2%)
5	Linguistic taboo usage in Yoruba language helps discourage the use of vulgar language among youths.	98 (54.4%)	74 (41.1%)	02 (1.1%)	04 (2.2%)	02 (1.1%)
6	Linguistic taboo usage among the Yoruba language helps preserves the sacredness of ancestral cults and socio-cultural beliefs among the Yorubas.	96 (53.3%)	76 (42.2%)	02 (1.1%)	02 (1.1%)	04 (2.2%)
7	Lack of usage of linguistic taboos in Yoruba language has led to moral degradation among youths in contemporary days.	102 (56.6%)	68 (37.8%)	02 (1.1%)	04 (2.2%)	02 (1.1%)

8	The teachings of the significance and use of linguistic taboos should be included in the Yoruba language syllabus to help boost moral among youths.	98 (54.4%)	74 (41.1%)	02 (1.1%)	02 (1.1%)	04 (2.2%)
9	The teachings of the use of linguistic taboos in Yoruba language should not be included in our school curriculum.	04 (2.2%)	02 (1.1%)	02 (1.1%)	98 (54.4%)	74 (41.1%)

Note: (i) SA: Strongly Agreed

ii) A: Agreed

(iii) N: Neutral

(iv) SD: Strongly Disagreed

(v) D: Disagreed

SOURCE: Result of the analysis of

questionnaires.

From ‘Fig 2’ above, the analysis of students’ respondents revealed that 56.6% of the students’ respondents strongly agreed that non- usage of the linguistic taboos in Yoruba language in the contemporary time has led to moral degradation in our society. Also, 53.3% of students’ respondents strongly agreed that the use of linguistic taboos in Yoruba language helps preserves the sacredness of the ancestral worship. Since many (54.4%) of the students’ respondents strongly agreed that the use of linguistic taboos in Yoruba language should be included in the Yoruba language curriculum in our schools, the education policy makers in Yoruba land should quickly put this into the school curriculum.

Discussion of Findings

The use of the linguistic taboos in Yoruba language discovered from the analysis of our gathered data revealed that the Ikoyi lineage in Yoruba land has a linguistic taboo that women in their society should not call ‘agbon’ (basket) and ‘igba’ (calabash) their proper names. It is forbidden to do so because the people believe that doing so will promote war in their society.

Secondly, it is a taboo to call ‘oko’ (penis) its proper name., Instead, the Yoruba believe that it should be called ‘nkan okunrin’ (man instrument), ‘kokoro’ (insect). This taboo helps discourage the use of vulgar language among youths in Yoruba land. Thirdly, ‘obo’ (vagina) should not be pronounced among the Yorubas. It is a taboo to do so. The Yorubas encourage the youths to call it ‘onisanbo.’ Or ‘ele idi obinrin’

Among the Yorubas, it is a taboo to state that ‘oba ti ku’ (The king has died) in Yoruba land. Instead, the Yoruba people say ‘Oba wo aja’ (The King climbed the ceiling). Yoruba people believe that the king cannot die but will transcend into the ancestral world.

Also, the ‘Yoruba has the linguistic taboo that it is wrong to announce the death of anybody by saying ‘O ti ku’ (He has died). Instead, the Yorubas prefer to state that ‘O ti faa wo’” (He has left) or ‘O ti gbe ise sile’ (He has stopped working) or ‘O ti dagbere f’aye’ (He/she has said ‘bye bye to the world).

It is a taboo to state that ‘Lagbaja do omoge naa’ (Lagbaja had sex with the girl). Instead, it is preferable to say that ‘Lagbaja ba omoge naa lo po’ (Lagbaja had a carnal knowledge of the girl) or ‘Lagbaja ba omoge naa sun’ (Lagbaja slept with the girl). It is also a linguistic taboo to state that ‘Tamedo’ ti loyun.’ Instead, it is preferable to state that ‘Tamedo ti fera ku (Tamedo has become pregnant).

It is also a linguistic taboo to state that ‘Mo fe ra abere’ in Yoruba land. Instead, the Yorubas agreed that ‘abere’ (needle) should be called ‘okinni’. It is a linguistic taboo to call measles (olode) by its name in Yoruba land. Instead, it is called ‘Baba Agba’ in Yoruba land. There is a general belief that if measles is called ‘Sanponna’ in Yoruba land it will become a pandemic in the society. Some of the linguistic taboos in Yoruba language usage discovered from our data are in ‘Fig 3’ below.

Fig 3: Examples of linguistic taboos in Yoruba language usage discovered from oral interview conducted.

S/N	Linguistic Taboos in Yoruba Language	Preferable Patterns	Lexical Meaning	Reasons for the use of the Linguistic taboo
1	Oba <u>ku</u>	(i) Opo ye (ii) Oba w’aja	(i) The pillar has fallen. (ii) The king climbed ceiling	Kings in Yoruba land <u>transcends</u> to ancestral world.

2	Oba <u>nsun</u> lowo	Oba nreju	The king is sleeping.	Yoruba kings don't sleep because of their sacredness.
3	Ọ ti ya were	Ọ ns'aare	He is insane	Yorubas prefer politeness in speech.
4	Ọ ti <u>loyun</u>	Ọ ti <u>feraku</u>	She has become pregnant.	Yorubas often encourage politeness in their speeches.
5	<u>Okoba</u> ni akunrin naa	<u>Aguntan</u> ti bu u je	The man is impotent.	The Yorubas prefers polite language usage.
6	Ọ ti <u>ku</u>	(i) Ọ <u>teri gba aso</u> (ii) Ọ <u>salaj si</u>	He has died.	Yorubas prefer polite language usage.
7	Mo ri <u>oba</u> omoge naa	(i) Mo ri <u>ele</u> idi re. (ii) Mo ri <u>iyamopo</u> re.	I saw her vagina.	Yorubas prefer the use of polite language.

Pedagogical Implications

Use of linguistic taboos in the Yoruba language usage reflects that Yoruba people of Southwestern Nigeria observe linguistic taboos in order to (i) discourage the use of vulgar language among youths, (ii) to encourage morals among youths and (iii) to preserve the sacredness and sanctity of their ancestral cults and socio-cultural beliefs.

It has been discovered through the oral interview carried out in this study that non-usage of the linguistic taboos in the Yoruba language in contemporary time had led to moral decadence in our society. Hence, the use of linguistic taboos in Yoruba language should be taught in the Southwestern Nigerian Secondary Schools so as to preserve our socio-cultural heritage and to improve morals among our youths.

Conclusion

This paper examines the cultural and linguistic taboos among the Yorubas. It equally explains the significance of the use of the linguistic taboos in the Yoruba language usage in Yoruba land. Since the usage of these linguistic taboos helps develop the Yoruba social and cultural heritage as well as preserving the sacredness of the Yoruba ancestral worship, the paper recommends that the teaching and learning of the philosophical concept of

‘eewo’ and linguistic taboos should be taught in the Southwestern Nigerian Secondary Schools.

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