

## Study of Chinese and English Appellation Taboo Language from the Perspective of Cross-Cultural Communication

**Hongping Chen**

School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Baoding, 071000, China

**Xinyue Wang\***

School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Baoding, 071000, China

### Abstract

With the rapid development of economic globalization, the intercommunication between different cultures have also been progressively enhanced. Taboo language as a cultural phenomenon has gained a common concern. At the same time, appellations play an important role in cross-cultural communication, using the proper address terms may help the communication go smoothly. So appellation taboos should be taken enough attention. The appellation taboos have been studied to some extent over the past years. However, because the appellation taboos have sensitive nature, most people often avoid talking about this topic. Through comparing differences between English and Chinese, this paper aims at reducing some misunderstanding during the cross-cultural communication and making us communicate smoothly. In addition to the definition of taboo and appellation, this paper also studies appellation taboo language in the following types: naming, position, race and gender. Based on the research, the paper shows the differences between Chinese and English and then give the reason. At the end of this paper, four ways are mentioned to help us use appellation taboos correctly in cross-cultural communication.

**Keywords:** Taboo; Appellation taboo language; Cross-cultural communication.



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### 1. Introduction

Language is the carrier of culture and its meaning is closely related to culture. In today's society, as long as you live in the community, it is unavoidable to communicate with others. However, in the social interaction, especially in the cross-cultural communication, people often come across a sensitive problem which is called linguistic taboos. It is not only the phenomenon of language, but also regarded as a universal culture in all human societies. With the developing of globalization, cross-cultural communication is increasing at an amazing speed. In cross-cultural communication, it is necessary to learn linguistic taboo which aims at reducing some misunderstanding and cultural conflict.

There has been a long time about the study of taboo and appellation. The word "taboo" was created from Tonga, it was not unique but ubiquitous in all languages in the world. There has been a long time about the study of taboo language. "Much has been written on taboo in this century, most of it tends to discredit the most famous Victorian theorist of taboo, James Frazer" (Robison, 1994). Two Victorian scholars, W. Robinson Smith and Sir James Frazer made great contribution to the theories of taboo. In his *Religion of Semites*, Robinson connected taboo with the primitive superstition. Besides Frazer, other anthropologists also studied the taboo. Among them, Steiner offers a comprehensive history of the development of the word taboo. Since the 1960's, a lot of sociolinguists started paying attention to the study of linguistic taboo, and its relationship with culture. Just as Wardhaugh said: "Taboo is one way in which a society expresses its disapproval of certain kind of behavior believed to be harmful to its members, either for supernatural reasons or because such behavior is held to violate a moral code" (Wardhangh, 2006).

No matter in which language, appellations play a significant role. Due to different cultures between Chinese and English, some appellation taboo language should be avoided during the communication. Through the study of linguistic taboos and the study of appellation, this thesis aims at achieving a deeper understanding of linguistic taboo between Chinese and English especially in appellations. What's more, this thesis tries to help people to solve the problem of appellation taboo language in intercultural communication.

This thesis will fall into five parts. The first part is the detail explanation of taboo, including its definition and features. The second part is about the kind of English and Chinese appellation taboo language and their differences. This part mainly analyzes the differences as well as similarities of appellations taboo language between Chinese and English. The part three makes a further analysis of the reasons why Chinese and English have different appellation taboo language. The next part is the ways to tackle these taboos in communication. The last part is the conclusion which summarizes the main points of this thesis.

In brief, this thesis aims at reducing some misunderstanding and conflict during the cross-cultural communication and making us communicate smoothly.

## 2. An Overview of Taboo

Taboo is a word known to speakers but avoided because it is inappropriate in some, most, or all forms or contexts of speech, for reasons of religion, decorum, politeness, etc. However, it exists everywhere when we come to cross-cultural communication. So it is necessary for us to have a deeper understanding about taboos.

### 2.1. The Origin and Development of Taboo

The word “taboo” came from Tonga, a polynesian language, with the meaning of something forbidden or avoided. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Captain James Cook (1729-1779), a British navigator, came to Tonga in the southern part of the Pacific ocean. He discovered many odd customs and taboo phenomena there and brought back the word “tabu” to Britain, which later became the English word “taboo” (陈原, 1983). So the term “taboo” comes from the Tongan tapu or Fujian tabu (“prohibited”, “disallowed”, “forbidden”), related among others to the Maori tapu, Hawaiian kapu, Malagasy fady.

As Wardhangh (2006) states: “taboo is one way in which a society expresses its disapproval of certain kinds of behavior believed to be harmful to its members, either for supernatural reasons or because such behavior is held to violate amoral code”(Wardhangh, 2006).

Taboo is a social phenomenon that exists in almost all cultures and languages. It means bans that people cannot do due to some religion or belief or other reasons. It is widely considered that taboo is dangerous, mysterious and untouchable. Using taboo would cause misunderstanding more conflict. Taboo can be divided into two aspects. One is called linguistic taboo and the other is called behavioral taboo. Behavioral taboo exists in our daily life. For instance, eating, walking, greeting and so on. While the linguistic taboo refers to words that could not be mentioned in some situations. Linguistic taboo is able to make people angry. It is known to speakers but avoided because it is inappropriate in some contexts of speech, for religion, politeness, etc. In this polite society, some obscene, profane or swear expressions may be prohibited. For example, the word “death” is often replaced in most occasions by a metaphor like “pass away”.

### 2.2. The Features of Taboo Language

Taboo is a social and cultural phenomenon. Its production has social and cultural functions. The taboo language not only shows the features of general characteristics of culture but also has its own unique characteristics, such as follows:

#### 2.2.1. Universality

Linguistic taboo exists in varied fields of language and religion, with a range from daily life to society activities. No matter in primitive tribes or modern societies, in China or western countries, phenomenon of linguistic taboo is universal. Since people were born, they all lived in an environment full of taboos. Taboo language exists anywhere. It plays a significant role in adjusting the relationships among people in order to establish a stable society.

For instance, if someone dies, nobody says that directly. In China, we also use “qu le”(去了), “lao le”(老了) “zuo gu”(作古), “zou le”(走了) to substitute the word “death”. In the west, “pass away”, “go to sleep”, “pass out” are used to replace the word “death”. Generally speaking, we can say that universality is a vital feature of both the Chinese and English taboos.

#### 2.2.2. Variability

As time goes by, taboo language changes, too. Language changes due to development of society. With the development of culture and the progress of society, some old words disappeared and some got a new meaning. Some words used to be taboos but may not be tabooed today. Take the word “god” for example. It was a word that people might be unwilling to say directly. It was seen as a profane language only used in some special occasions that was related to religions. If someone says god or Jesus directly, this must be an offense and seen as impolite. However, in today’s society, some young people may use it to express some strong emotion. It is seen as an exclamation of surprise, excitement, sadness, or fear instead of offending anyone.

Take OH, MY GOD for example. This utterance just seems to express the speaker’s astonishment. In addition, in some urgent situations, it also represents a signal of survival.

Conversely, there also exist some words which used to be spoken by common people but later become taboos. For instance, in feudal society, some words did not belong to Taboos. However, due to regime change, it violated the emperor’s name or Dynasty’s name and became taboos. For example, a poet named Lin Xujun was killed in Qing Dynasty because he wrote a poem “明月有情还顾我，清风无意不留人”(In this poem, he used the word “qingfeng”. However, it had an ambiguous meaning. He was killed cause this word had a meaning of short-lived) If he was born in Tang Dynasty, he might not be killed.

From the example, we could find during the development of society, taboos have special meaning. We should look at it with different eyes in different situations.

#### 2.2.3. Nationality

In a nation, different areas also show the different features. Take China for example, people born in north areas are accustomed to say euphemism. They will say “pass away” or “have gone” instead of “die”, while Cantonese like

using converse meaning to avoid taboos. E.g. “not good” for “bad”.

Nationality is a remarkable feature of taboo language. Every nation has its own distinctive culture. Different nations have their own feature which is distinguished from the other nations in the process of developing. As a result of natural environment, in English-speaking countries and in China, their social customs and habits are very different, therefore languages are not the same either. Taboo as a unique language phenomenon is without exception. Take an example, in some western countries, 7 is a lucky number while in China, 7 represents unlucky.

### 3. Differences and Similarities between English and Chinese Appellation Taboos

Appellation, as a specific relationship in human society, represents specific roles. As a social ritual, appellation can reflect certain social and cultural relations between people. Address terms play an important role in cross-cultural communication. Using the proper address terms may help the communication go smoothly and reducing misunderstanding even conflict. As for differences and similarities, there are several types between Chinese and English appellation taboos.

#### 3.1. The Naming Taboo

How to address others is a vital element during communication. In China, we have taboo of clan and state. Young people are forbidden to call people's name whose age is older than themselves. What's more, they cannot use the names of one's own ancestors or emperors. Some partial tone is also tabooed. It is considered to be impolite. For example, during the Qin Dynasty, First Emperor of Qin's given name Zheng(政) was avoided, and the first month of the year “ZhengYue”(政月 : the administrative month ) was rewritten into “ZhengYue”(正月 : the upright month) The character 正 was also pronounced with a different tone (zhèng to zhēng) to avoid any similarity. Generally, ancestors' names going back to seven generations must be avoided. The strength of this taboo was reinforced by law; transgressors could expect serious punishment for writing an emperor's name without modifications. In 1777, Wang Xihou(王錫侯) in his dictionary criticized the Kangxi dictionary and wrote Qianlong Emperor's name without leaving out any stroke as required. This disrespect resulted in his and his family's executions and confiscation of their property. This type of naming taboo is less observed in modern China.

But in English speaking countries, their name taboos are different from China. In order to show they are equal, friendly and intimate, the younger generation often address the elder generation's name directly. Many American cities are named after president like Lincoln, Jefferson and so on. They also use Elizabeth or Charles to name their kids. Moreover, English babies are always named after their grandparents or their relatives, which shows their respect and admiration. This practice is quite different from Chinese culture.

#### 3.2. The Position Taboo

How to address others in work place should be paid significant attention to. In the work environment, appellation has its particularity.

In China, the most common way is as follows:

(1) The first way also the most common way is to call people with his surname and position in order to show respect. For instance, “王局长”(Director Wang) “赵经理” (Manager Zhao) “李校长” (Principle Li) and so on. But there is one thing we should pay attention to. In daily life, in order to convey respect, Chinese often call a vice-director “周局长”( Director Zhou ) rather than “周副局长”( Vice-director Zhou ).

(2) Sometimes we address people with their positions only. For example: "Minister", "Manager", "Director", and so on.

(3) In some occasions, we address people with his position and his full name together. This appellation is used only for extremely formal occasions. For example: "President Xi Jinping." In such formal occasions, we are supposed to call properly. It is less suitable only to call President Xi in international conference.

In western countries, the form of position address is much simpler. People call teacher “Mr.Wang” but not “Teacher Wang” as we do in China. Addressing a teacher “Teacher Wang” may confuse him. In western countries, they don't call “Director Wang”, they just call “Manager” or “Mr./Mrs./Ms.+Liu”. But in the academia field, it is better to call people with a high degree “Prof./Dr.+surname” rather than “Mr./Mrs/Ms.”

#### 3.3. The Race Taboo

In English, racial taboo plays an important role, especially in American English. In the American history, the African-American suffered discrimination because of their skin color. The native Americans often call Black Americans “nigger” or “niggra”. For Black Americans, Nigger is a taboo with strong insult.

Unlike America, Chinese don't have such a deep race discrimination. However, there also exists some national discrimination, such as Han nationality and other minority. Han called Hui people Hui Zi (回子) and called incompetent doctors Menggu Daifu (蒙古大夫) .

#### 3.4. The Gender Taboo

Discrimination against woman is a common phenomenon in the society. Sexist language is the reflection of this unfair phenomenon in the society. There are always traces of sexist language no matter in English or Chinese. If one

is not careful enough with his/her speech, he/she may easily offend others unwittingly. Because of prevailing strict hierarchy feudal society in ancient China, females were regarded inferior. They depended on male and were dominated by male. So the discrimination and prejudice against women is accumulated in a long term, which is inevitably reflected in Chinese. For example, the sayings “妇人之见”(women’s view), “头发长见识短”(long hair and short wit), “长舌妇”(women who are gossip), etc, reflect the contemptuous attitude toward women. And there are also many derogatory titles for women, such as “贱人”(bitch), “泼妇”(shrew), “母老虎”(tigress), “母夜叉”(shrew), “悍妇”(virago) etc.

Since Chinese women’s social statuses have been increased, these sayings are used much less frequently. The using of the scornful and pejorative words for women in public often gets criticism and resentment. In English, there are also many sexist expressions. For example, a person of unknown sex is referred as “he”, or “him” rather than “she” or “her”. A person who presides a meeting is the “chairman”, even if she is a woman. There are many other examples about it.

“cow” means “(a) woman who has many children”, “mutton” means “(b) dissolute woman”, “hen” means “(c) woman who likes gossip”, “cat” means “(d) malicious woman”, “crone” means “(an) ugly withered old woman” etc.

No matter Chinese or English, these expressions about gender are one kind of appellation taboo language. With the improvement of women status, we should pay great importance to these words.

From the above analysis, we can draw a conclusion that there are many differences between Chinese and English. Such as the naming appellation, the position appellation and the gender appellation. But why there exists such a huge difference between Chinese and English is another point we should focus on.

## 4. The Reasons Why Chinese and English Have Different Taboos

Chinese and English have many different taboos, and the following will give you a brief description of its reasons from two aspects: religious belief and value.

### 4.1. Religious Belief

In China, the concept of harmony weighs much in Chinese traditional culture. Most of Chinese gods come from the two religions in China: Taoism and Buddhism. Besides, for the sake of practical need, people also create gods from some professions to worship. The formation of the patriarchal clan system determines the legitimacy of Confucianism. Confucianism and most emperors advocating "loyalty" and "benevolence". Therefore, in ancient times, we were forbade to use the name of emperor or respectable people.

In English speaking countries, most people worship Christian. Christian culture also has a deep cultural background. The emergence of Christianity has close connection with the concept of soul. In the clan society, the disparity between the rich and the poor is aggravated. As a result, the nobility and the common people are seriously opposite. Civilians, in order to fight against exploitation and to resolve disputes, got together and fought for their own rights, they wanted justice. In their view, the most important factor of a man is the soul. Man must fight for his own soul's cleanliness and his own righteousness. Compared to the authority of the Chinese system, western people pay more attention to the inner faith than the law. Most Christians advocate justice. The other point worth noting is that God is unrivaled. They have a religious belief and they believe that it is irreverent to abuse God’s name, so they always say “gosh”, “golly” for God. Most religious words such as “God”, “heaven”, “Christ”, “hell”, “Jesus” were less used in daily life but used in serious talking.

### 4.2. Value

In China, the view of collective is the core value. Beside, men usually play a dominant role in family. In order to strengthen their position and to prevent their subjects from violating them, the royals and kings put forward different kinds of prohibitions and bans. For instance, to show their authority and majesty, the name of the emperor and his ancestors should not be mentioned. At the same time, people always avoided speaking out their parents’ names or even the characters in their parents’ names. The old saying “古人闻父名而泣” (tabooed names of father and ancestors) can prove this point. While most English-speaking people often worship equality and freedom. So they don’t want to be treated with injustice. For example, even older people think they are equal to any other young people. They don’t think they are old. Their values are far different from Chinese, as for appellation, due to the weak sense of family, their taboos are simpler than Chinese. the West has a democratic, equal thought and they give due attention to the protection of individual rights. In modern times, the idea of human rights and the equality of human rights emerged. The idea of equality determines that they do not pay attention to special appellation such as Chinese do. For example, China has “tangjie” (堂姐), “biaojie” (表姐), “tangmei” (堂妹), “biaomei” (表妹), “tangge” (堂哥), “tangdi” (堂弟), “biaoge” (表哥), “biaodi” (表弟), but in western countries, they only use one word “cousin” to cover all these meanings.

## 5. Ways of Avoiding Appellation Taboos in Cross-Culture Communication

The tendency of cross-cultural communication is inevitable. In order to have a better communication with English-speaking people, it is the high time that we should come to understand some ways of avoiding appellation taboos.

### 5.1. Having a Good Knowledge of Different Culture

Different languages have different ways of expression. In cross-cultural communication, we are required to learn other cultures' knowledge. Only by this, can we finally avoid appellation taboos and do as Romans do.

Language and culture rely on each other and influence each other. Languages are formed under certain cultural background. Linguistic taboo is a kind of social phenomenon. Its existence and development are restricted and influenced by specific cultural background. Some words are prohibited in English; some words are banned in Chinese and some words are prohibited in both languages. As a result, if one wants to avoid violating taboos, he or she should have a good knowledge of what is or is not a taboo in this culture. Saying what should be said, doing as Romans do.

For example, in China, the word "old" was used to represent "sophisticate" and "wisdom". At the same time, Chinese people are influenced by the long-term concept of respecting the old. Chinese people seem to like to address each other as "老 (old)", for example, "老爷爷" (respectable grandfather), "老奶奶" (respectable grandmother), "老林" (Dear Lin), "老吴" (Dear Lin), "老教授" (knowledgeable professor). In these words, "old" refers to the respectful. But English people always connect the "old" with "uselessness" and "death". Therefore, when contacting with English people, the saying of "somebody is old" should be avoided in order not to arouse unpleasantness. For example, we cannot call somebody "old Smith" or "old Brown". Especially for women who are sensitive to age, no matter how old they are, we should not call them "nainai" (奶奶) or "daniang" (大娘), though they are pleasant greetings in China. There are some elements that cause misunderstanding directly. To avoid saying some taboos, we must learn the culture of English and Chinese. Only by this, can we address people politely and communicate with each other successfully.

Due to the Patriarchal clan system, Chinese has many special words used for specific people in particular situation. In Chinese, some words such as *gui* (贵), *ling* (令) etc. are said to show respect. While some words such as *she* (舍), *bi* (敝) etc. to show their modesty. However, there is no complete equivalence in English words which are equal to these Chinese expressions.

Concerning western culture, since ancient times, the West has a democratic, equal thought and they give due attention to the protection of individual rights. In modern times, the idea of human rights and the equality of human rights emerged. The idea of equality determines that they do not pay attention to special words such as Chinese do. In western countries, they also use polite language to their superiors or elders when they are writing letters, but it does not require any special words. Regardless of the age and the status of each other, they could address anyone you. But in Chinese we address our elders you (您). If a foreigner comes to China and tries to speak to others, he cannot say you (你) to his boss or elder people. This must be kept in mind.

### 5.2. Using Euphemism

From the above discussion, we know that some unpleasant offend and taboo language or acts should not be expressed directly in our daily life. So it is very important for us to know how to avoid these linguistic taboos. Most linguistic taboos can be avoided by the employment of euphemisms. The word "euphemism" originated from Greek, with the prefix "eu-" meaning "good, well", the root "pheme" meaning "speak", and the suffix "-ism" meaning "the action or its result". Thus, "euphemism" literally means "to speak well of, to use good omen" (Howard, 1984). It refers to the use of pleasant, vague or indirect words or phrases to take the place of the taboo ones. In other words, euphemism is a means of expressing the words or things that are prohibited. Euphemisms are used almost in all fields of life. Ordinarily, we can accumulate some euphemisms.

It is universally known that taboos and euphemisms have always operated together in language. The usual way of coping with taboo words is to develop euphemisms.

For instance, replacing nigger by the African Americans and using longer living instead of old age.

Another example is that in western countries, people are unwilling to be called old people. Different from China, there is a kind of self-denial mechanism in western culture, they pay more attention to efficiency. So they would mind being called old people. We can use euphemism "senior citizens", "advanced in age", "golden years" etc. to call them.

### 5.3. Paying Attention to the Ability on Cultural Adjustment

No matter how much we know about the culture of western, there still exist some unexpected situations where we have never come across. Therefore, it is essential to improve our adjustment ability. Even though we sometimes cause some misunderstanding and annoy people, we cannot quarrel with them but communicate. At that moment, trying to explain what you mean and say sorry. It is necessary for us to remember these experiences and try not to make mistakes next time.

Even if the appellation seems almost the same, in the specific context it also has slight differences. So in intercultural communication, we should improve the ability of adjustment. Firstly, we should show a deep

understanding about the knowledge of local culture. Secondly, it is important to practice. In daily life, trying to observe other people's speech acts and imitate them. This is a process and should be accumulated day by day. Along with the accumulation, we will have a better understanding about different areas' taboos. As a result, we will achieve the purpose of smooth communication successfully.

## 5.4. Learning the Cross-Cultural Communication skills

### (1) Learning Foreign Culture

Time is flying. Language is not static either. People's attitudes vary with the development of the society. Inheritance and development of culture is a constant process. We cannot stop our steps into further knowledge but should continue to learn, continue to strengthen our own capabilities. Learning appellation taboos is limited to the specific cultural background. If you cannot completely understand each tiny aspect of other culture, you should understand the basic value and trends of foreign culture macroscopically.

### (2) Comparing the Similarities and Differences of Language

Generally speaking, there are both common and different characteristics in any culture. The appellation taboos is a kind of cultural phenomenon. It also reflects meaning. We should seek to reach the common understanding between Chinese and English so as to reach a smooth communication. At the same time, understanding the differences between different areas is also important to us. Through this way can we avoid the embarrassment during the communication.

### (3) Learning to Treat People Sincerely

Good cultural awareness and language knowledge play a significant role in cross-cultural communication. In addition, another important factor is sincerity. Attitude decides everything. Sincerity is the basis of communication. Being kind to others sometimes helps people to communicate beyond gaps. Willing to talk and understanding each other will contribute to better communication.

## 6. Conclusion

From this thesis, we know that appellation taboo is a social phenomenon existing in various cultures and languages. The use of appellation taboo seems against some communicative principle and some social norms, because it often makes people anxious, embarrassed or ashamed. Therefore learning about these appellation taboos and addressing people properly is essential for everyone.

This paper aims at arousing readers' awareness of the importance of appellation taboos during the cross-cultural communication. At the beginning, we just know the origin and features of taboo. The following analyzes Chinese and western appellation taboo language from some aspects: the naming taboo, the position taboo and the gender and race taboos. From the analysis of these taboos, we found that English and Chinese meet a huge difference in appellation taboo language. In Chinese, appellation seems more complicated than in western countries. Then we give reasons why they are different from each other. By researching, the thesis summarizes two main reasons of their difference: religious belief and value. Finally the author proposes some ways of avoiding appellation taboos in cross-cultural communication. Firstly, having a good knowledge about taboo language and different areas' cultures. Secondly, learning to use euphemism correctly, in addition, paying attention to the ability on cultural adjustment and finally, learning to treat people sincerely. All these ways should be used when people communicate.

There are also some limitations in this paper. Appellation taboos exists our daily life, and it has more than these facets. We will keep learning for further study.

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