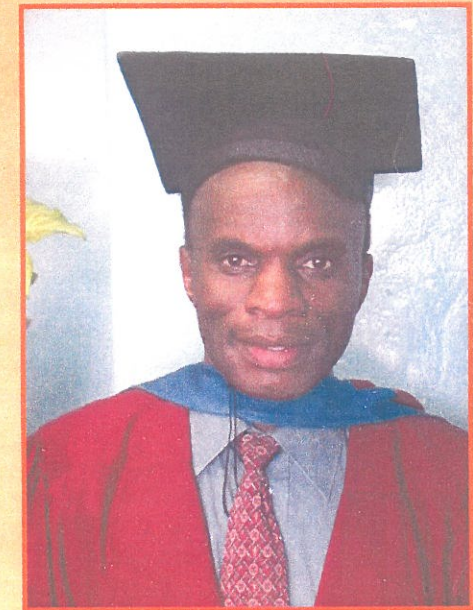


Inaugural Address

by

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Communications**



**Linguistic Taboos in Tshivenda:
Communicating across Epochs**



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LINGUISTIC TABOOS IN TSHIVENDA: COMMUNICATING ACROSS EPOCHS

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Abstract

Taboos in general and linguistic taboos in particular play a major role in Tshivenda culture and communication respectively. All speakers should be aware of such taboos lest they cause mayhem and miscommunication among different interlocutors. The article shows that Tshivenda cannot function appropriately without taking into account the role that taboos play in daily discourse. As taboos embrace a vast field, the lecture will only concentrate on a few topics such as the impact of linguistic taboos on respect for authority, swearing (expletives), body parts and functions, and sex.

Introduction

At the moment there is a debate raging as to whether South Africa has lost its moral compass. The debate is occasioned, among others, by the high rate of murder, rape, abuse of women and children, as well as the apparent lack of respect for law and authority that currently afflict South Africa. It seems that everybody is blaming everybody else for these ills. No one would like to take full responsibility for this sad state of affairs. Amid this confusion and frustration, I was obliged to pose the following question: what role do languages as a vehicle through which human beings express their thoughts and feelings play in the current malaise that South Africa finds itself? As a result of this, I thought it would be fitting for me to treat a topic that is pertinent to the aforementioned situation in South Africa from a linguistic perspective.

The aim of this lecture is to examine the role that linguistic taboos play in Tshivenda. This is mainly necessitated by the fact that interlocutors seem uncertain as to which words and expressions are suitable or unsuitable for use in numerous contexts. Consequently, the results are often dire as there will be miscommunication, misinterpretation, misunderstanding, and even conflict between people. Although the emphasis will be on linguistic taboos, the lecture will frequently refer to taboos in general as

well. In order to achieve the aforementioned aim, the following questions will be scrutinized:

What are linguistic taboos?

Why should linguistic taboos be regarded as crucial components of everyday discourse?

How pertinent are linguistic taboos to the present-day world?

The approach to this analysis will be qualitative in nature because qualitative research is concerned with understanding the social phenomenon under investigation by posing, among others, questions such as how and why the phenomenon occurs (White, 2002:11). Furthermore, qualitative study presents facts in an explanatory manner compared to quantitative research which prioritises the presentation of statistical data and results (Neuman, 2003:331) (Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches. Boston: Allyn and Bacon).

Definition of language and linguistic taboos

Human beings are the only species that are endowed with the ability to use language. Other species can of course communicate through other means, but not through language. Language is a vital feature that distinguishes human beings from animals. This seems to be the case because human beings are in most instances rational in whatever they do while animals largely depend on instincts for survival. All this is confirmed by Fromkin and Rodman (1993:3) when they aver:

The possession of language, perhaps more than any other attribute, distinguishes humans from other animals. To understand our humanity one must understand the nature of language that makes us human. According to the philosophy expressed in the myths and religions of many peoples, it is language that is the source of human life and power. To some people of Africa, a newborn child is a kuntu, a “thing,” not yet a muntu, a “person”. Only by the act of learning does the child become a human being. Thus, according to this tradition, we all become “human” because we all know at least one language.

It is also vital to know that languages are governed by rules because “they follow observable patterns that obey certain inherent rules” (Finegan, 1994:10). As a result of these rules, people can discern whether sentences are grammatical or ungrammatical. This ability is called **grammatical competence**. After the acquisition of grammatical competence, a speaker has to show the ability of when and how to use language appropriately. Finegan, 1994:11) echoes this sentiment when he suggests that

The capacity that enables us to use language appropriately is called **communicative competence**. It enables language users to weave utterances together into conversations, apologies, requests, directions, sermons, scoldings, or jokes...”

Both grammatical competence and communicative competence are equally important as neither of these can function effectively without the other. Finegan (1994:11) confirms this when he remarks:

Knowing a language – being a fluent speaker – presumes both communicative and grammatical competence. Neither one is sufficient by itself to constitute fluency in the ordinary sense of the word... to be fluent grammatical competence and communicative competence are jointly needed.

From the foregoing discussion, it is evident that linguistic taboos belong to communicative competence as will be shown.

Proctor (1997: 1484) defines taboo as “the avoidance among a particular group of people, of particular actions or words for religious or social reasons”. It is worthwhile to note that taboo is in fact a Tongan word meaning forbidden (Fromkin and Rodman, 1993:302; , 2007:1). In the same vein, Captain James Cook (, nd:1), who borrowed the term from Tongan into English in 1769, points out that this word “has a very comprehensive meaning; but in general, signifies that a thing is forbidden... When any thing is forbidden to be eaten, or made use of, they say, that is taboo.” Wikipedia (, nd: 6) provides a more comprehensive definition of taboo: “A taboo is a strong social prohibition (or ban) against words, objects, actions, or people that are considered undesirable by a group, culture or society”.

In present-day discourse, taboo is thus synonymous to words such as ban, disallowance, inhibition, interdiction, and prohibition. In a nutshell, linguistic taboos are nothing but forbidden words and expressions; or rather, words and expressions that must not be used or spoken; and these in most instances are used to describe sex, body parts and their functions as well as those that are used to insult people. Akmajian, Demers, Farmer and Harnish (1990:258) concur with this description of linguistic taboos because they regard taboo words as those words “that are to be avoided entirely, or at least avoided in ‘mixed company’ or ‘polite company’”.

What may be taboo in one language may not be so in another language as taboo language is defined by culture. Many words that are taboo in African languages are expressed as normal words in English daily use. Educated African people would avoid using some words in their mother tongues and use English instead because the words belonging to the latter sound acceptable. For example, it is taboo to say *murundo* in Tshivenda while it is deemed acceptable to use *urine* as its English equivalent.

Taboos have been in existence since time immemorial. Human beings have always had some mechanisms, structured or unstructured, of creating and maintaining social order in their respective communities. Laws, rules and regulations were and are still designed to ensure stability among people. It is a given that without such stipulations, there would be mayhem among various communities.

In the Christian community, taboos abound. The ten commandments, among others, serve as an apt example in this regard as the following examples indicate:

Worship no god but me.

Do not commit murder.

Do not commit adultery.

Do not steal.

Do not accuse anyone falsely (*Good News Bible: Today's English Version*. Exodus 20:1-17).

The important words that stand out in the above-mentioned example are: **do not**. The implication is that if one does not adhere to such an

instruction or command, one would find oneself in trouble. The words or expression **do not** applies to all languages though in a different form morphologically. Only a few South African languages will be used for illustration:

- (1) Tshivenda: *U songo*
Northern Sotho (Sepedi): *O seke wa*
Xitsonga: *U nga*
Afrikaans: *Moenie*
SiSwati: *Unga (shayeli unatsili)*.

Taboos occur in and are applicable to everyday-life as well. For instance, numerous road rules are tabooic in nature:

Do not drink and drive.

Do not speed.

Do not drive without a license.

Do not let children sit in the front seat.

Do not cross a red robot.

All these taboos are meant to safeguard people's lives. If such taboos were not in existence, it would be extremely difficult to ensure the safety of road users. On the other hand, there are some taboos that are detrimental to the development of a people. For example, in Tshivenda and many other cultures, it is an unwritten yet pervasive law that one dare not oppose one's parents, superiors and leaders no matter how wrong they could be. This seems to instill in African leadership the idea that they are omnipotent and beyond criticism. This explains why many African countries hardly tolerate any opposition parties.

It is mostly through language that a people can achieve their social, political and economic goals. Conversely, language can also be applied as an instrument of destruction, mayhem and unhappiness. Therefore, users of language have to be on their toes at all times as what they wittingly or unwittingly express can either build or destroy other human beings.

The foregoing discussion notwithstanding, it is worthwhile to acknowledge that people “are not always quite as rational, articulate and disciplined as we might wish to be since we are, like it or not, also

emotional, sexual and aggressive animals” (Ardo, 2001:1). As a result of this, people sometimes disregard taboos in spite of their dire consequences. It is, therefore, necessary to undertake a study on when and why people find it imperative and profitable to use what is generally called bad language.

Linguistic taboos cover a vast field so that it will be impossible in a lecture of this nature to treat all aspects of linguistic taboos. Nevertheless, for illustrative purposes, the lecture will cover the following topics: **respect for authority, swearing (expletives), body parts and their function, and sex.**

Respect for authority

Linguistic taboos play an important role in promoting and preserving the status of chieftainship in African languages. In Tshivenda, for instance, it is not allowed to call a chief by his or her first name as to do so would be tantamount to undermining his or her image and authority as a chief. Mbiti (1975:160) reveals that the chief is respected because he or she is the link between the tribe and ancestors or gods. In fact, it would be an unforgivable insult to call the chief especially by his first name. The culprit would be liable for a fine in the form of money or cattle. In some countries such as those in the Middle East, North Africa and Asia, this would be tantamount to insulting royalty and the punishment could be a long prison term or even a death sentence (Sowetan, 2007:5 (date:23 February)). It is preferable to call a chief either by his or her praise name or totem:

Examples of praises in Tshivenda

- (2) a. *Tshidada muhali*
(You are a fearsome hero)
- b. *Mbilalume*
(You are a male rock rabbit)
- c. *Vhane vha mavu*
(Owner of the soil/land)

d. *Tsha u fuka na tsha u a dza*
(You are everything)

The use of praise names and totems instead of first names also abound in other cultures such as the following:

Northern Sotho

- (3) a. *Sebata sa mariri*
(The beast of prey with a name)
- b. *Tau' a Tswako*
(The lion of Tswako)
- c. *Kolobe*
- d. *Tau*
- e. *Nare*
- f. *Mohwaduba*
- g. *Hlabirwa*
(Mohale, 2006:14).

isiZulu

- (4) a. *Wena we Ndlovu!*
(Though oh Elephant!)
- b. *Bayede! Bayede!*
(We salute thee! We salute thee!).

According to Mohale (2006:15), the use of animals such as lions and elephants signifies the powerful status of the chief. It will, therefore, be demeaning to refer to a chief by an ordinary name. In African culture, Shakespeare's adage, 'a rose by any other name would smell as sweet' does not hold.

The advent of modernity and Western civilization has of course eroded the aura that chiefs had. The collaboration of chiefs with colonialism and

apartheid contributed to this sad state of affairs. Kessel and Oomen (1997: 561) buttress this viewpoint when they point out that “during the apartheid era, chiefs were maligned as puppets of bantustan rule”. In order to show disdain, disrespect and aversion to the unholy alliance between apartheid and some chiefs in South Africa, people used first names to address such chiefs. For example:

- (5) Patrick (Mphephu) – Venda
Lucas (Mangope) – Bophuthatswana
Hudson (Ntsanwisi) – Gazankulu
Kaizer (Matanzima) – Transkei
Cedric (Phatudi) – Lebowa
Wessels (Mota) – Qwaqwa.

Ordinary people did not find it profitable to use titles such as “your excellency” or “your majesty” to refer to homeland leaders because they regarded these chiefs as representatives of the demon of apartheid. What all this proves is that when people are angry, hungry, dissatisfied and desperate, injunctions such as linguistic taboos are thrown overboard. Therefore, leaders all over the world should do their utmost to meet the basic needs of their respective people. This is why in Tshivenda it is enunciated that *khosi ndi khosi nga vhathu* (a chief is a chief on account of people). In contrast to the picture alluded to before, people who were opposed to and have fought against apartheid have been called by names that reflect affection and respect such as *Tata* (father: Nelson Mandela), and *Mother of the Nation* (Winnie Mandela).

The use of titles, totems and praises is also applicable to married and elderly people. In this case, the norm is to use names of children and grandchildren when addressing married and elderly people as in:

- (6) a. *Mme a Mpho*
(Mpho’s mother)
- b. *Khotsi a Mashudu*
(Mashudu’s father)
- c. *Malume a Ndivhudza*
(Ndivhudza’s uncle)
- d. *Makhulu a Tinae*
(Tinae’s grandmother/grandfather).

The main reason for using children’s names to refer to married and elderly people is that marriage and children are crucial in African culture. In this regard Mbiti (1987:98) illuminates:

It is believed in many African societies that from the very beginning of human life, God commanded or taught people to get married and bear children. Therefore marriage is looked upon as a sacred duty which every normal person must perform. Failure to do so means in effect stopping the flow of life through the individual, and hence the diminishing of mankind upon the earth. Anything that deliberately goes towards the destruction or obstruction of human life is regarded as wicked and evil. Therefore anybody who, under normal conditions, refuses to get married, is committing a major offence in the eyes of society and people will be against him. In all African societies, everything possible is done to think in terms of marriage.

Mohale (2007:24) adds:

Without children one is deemed to be unlucky. Moreover, there will be no descendants born to him or her... The child, whose name is used in addressing the man, is usually either a first born child or notorious child.

As Tshivenda culture is premised on patriarchy, the responsibility of bearing children is largely borne by females. Words which are taboos because they are so offensive to women in general are used to compel such unmarried women to get married:

- (7) a. *Mutshelukwa*
(A spinster)
- b. *Madzanga a nnyo ndi nwana*
(What is best about the vagina is the child).

In all these instances, the issue of bearing children cannot be overemphasized. Mafenya (2002:112) accentuates this view as well when she remarks that “if a woman is a hard-worker and achieves a lot of things but does not have children, she is of no importance”.

Swearing (expletives/use of obscenity)

Swearing is usually divided into two forms. At one extreme, there is acceptable swearing where the intention is positive. In this case swearing may be used to denote “reactions to beautiful art or scenery, our expression of fear and affection, and the emotional outpourings of certain kinds of poetry” (Ademola-Adeoye, nd:15). For example:

- (8) a. Gosh!
- b. My!
- c. What a sight!
- d. Oh dear!
- e. Good heavens!

In Tshivenda, similar expressions abound although the noticeable difference will be the morphological categories to which such expressions belong:

- (9) a. *Nga vhanna!*
(By men!)
- B. *Mudzimu!*
(Oh God!)
- c. *Nga khaladzi/nga mme anga*
(I swear by my sister/by my mother).

The expression *nga vhanna* is used to denote surprise while *Mudzimu* indicates steadfastness. *Nga khaladzi* or *nga mme anga* is invoked when a speaker would like to show the listeners who are doubtful as to whether he or she is speaking the truth that he/she is indeed speaking nothing but the truth.

At the other extreme, swearing may have negative connotations as it may be used to express emotions such as hatred, antagonism, and anger (Ademola-Adeoye, nd:15). In addition, swearing subsumes subcategories such as slang, ethnic-racial slurs, vulgarity, verbal

aggression, insulting, name calling profanity, blasphemy, and obscenity (Ardo, 2001:2). Timothy Jay in Ardo (2001:2) posits that swearing espouses three important aspects of people’s behaviour, namely, neurological control, psychological restraints and socio-cultural restrictions. At the neurological level, swearing may be non-propositional or propositional. Pain, surprise, happiness and frustration as exemplified in examples (8) and (9), are classified under the neurological level. The propositional level embraces things such as telling dirty jokes. Linguistic taboos are also influenced by psychological factors which include personality and religion. Lastly, social and cultural factors affect issues such as gender identity, slang, magic, etiquette and law.

Swearwords also abound in English and these have been taboos since times immemorial. The f-word and b-word are still taboo and for one to use them would mean that one lacks manners or his/her upbringing was not up to scratch. Swearing of this kind is not encouraged in Tshivenda. As in English, the use of obscenity in Tshivenda leads people to think that one is uncivilised, immature, cruel, disrespectful, and sometimes simply an imbecile. This is why Veith (2003:1) suggests that swearing is “an affront to anyone with dignity, self-respect and intelligence”. Swearing used to be associated with poor and illiterate people. Nowadays however, this is no longer the case as it seems to afflict all categories of people (the educated and the rich as well). Nevertheless, “the use of profanities at certain times, especially in a public setting or during a solemn occasion, may always be considered inappropriate or in bad taste, if not outright abusive, obscene or offensive” (:1). This is not an embellishment as the use of linguistic taboos can lead to charges of *crimen injuria*. *Crimen injuria* “is the crime of deliberately injuring another person’s dignity, especially by use of racial insults or obscene language” (, 2007:1). It is thus commendable that some people will go out of their way to ensure that polite expressions are used instead.

Although this belief is not based on any empirical research, the belief that women’s language is more polite, also pertains to Tshivenda. According to Ademola-Adeoye (Art-Lg-Gender.htm, nd:15) “not only do females swear, but, the swear words and expressions are similar to those used by males, and females utter swear words and expressions almost as frequently as their male folk do”. However, as Tshivenda culture is highly patriarchal, there is some tolerance towards men who use expletives while such tolerance is not afforded to women. Thus,

women who engage in such behaviour may be seen as transgressing cultural stereotypes and the expectations of femininity, wherein they are perceived as deferent, polite, nurturing, and oriented towards the needs and feelings of others. Violating such a taboo by women, given the patriarchal nature of Tshivenda community, may lead to dire consequences such as:

- * Physical violence: a woman may be punched, slapped, kicked and even killed.
“In most cases a woman is treated like a young child. If she does something wrong she is beaten by her husband”
(Mafenya, 2002:88).
- * Emotional abuse: a woman will in turn be a victim of insults, and threats for expressing her emotions in vulgar language.
- * Difficulty in getting a marriage partner since her reputation as a woman of unbecoming manners will spread far and wide.

Although society expects women to be more polite by not using, among others, expletives (insults), my personal experiences on the Turfloop campus have, however, been different to the situation I have just described. I have often heard more female students swearing than their male counterparts. The most common expletives I have heard from female students on this campus are:

- (10) a. *O bolela m---*
(He/she speaks s---)
- b. *Lecturer ye i tlo ny---*
(This lecturer will s---)

Now, one might think: would one encourage one's son to marry such a girl if they were to fall in love? Given the patriarchal nature of South Africa, the answer seems obvious. This is the case because “a woman who uses ‘bad language’ is likely to invite not only negative social ascriptions, but also judgement regarding her moral standing and character” (Stapleton, 2003:3).

But perhaps more importantly, one should be asking the question: what makes these girls to behave in this manner which is contrary to societal expectations? The following hypotheses may be advanced:

Swearing may be used by females to demonstrate that they are equal to men;

Swearing may be a means of protesting against their inferior status in society;

As females hardly have access to or use dangerous weapons to defend themselves, swearing may act as a defence mechanism against social ills;

Swearing is a marker of group identity and solidarity (Ademola-Adeoye, nd:15);

“Females are more likely to swear just for the fun of it than males do” (Ademola-Adeoye, nd:17).

Flam (2006:2), quoting a psycholinguist called Timothy Jay, proposes that swearing is good for society in some respects:

We're the only animal that curse... which sometimes helps us avoid physical violence. It allows us to express our emotions symbolically and at a distance.

For example, Jay says, when a woman was weaving in front of him on the road that morning he was able to call her a “dumb ass” instead of getting out of his car and biting her.

In Tshivenda, body organs, excretion, sex, and the names of animals form the main sources of swear words and expressions. For example:

- (11) a. *Ningo yanu khulukhulu*
(Your big nose)
- b. *Ndi m--- zwe vha amba*
(It is s--- that you said)
- c. *Nguluvhe ndi inwi*
(You pig).

The examples that have been mentioned in (10) and (11) are of course taboo. One can only utter them at one's own peril. Of all the swear words in Tshivenda, one may be allowed to use some of them, but most certainly not for insulting someone's mother.

Sex, body organs and bodily functions

The direct mentioning of sexual activities, especially sexual intercourse, is also taboo in Tshivenda. As it is sometimes inevitable to mention these activities, Tshivenda and many other African languages prefer euphemisms to refer to them:

- (12) a. *Udzhena mabaini*
(To get into blankets)
- b. *Utangana*
(To meet each other)
- c. *Uita zwa vhudzekani*
(To perform the marriage act)
- d. *Uvhonana*
(To see each other)
- e. *Ulalana*
(To sleep on each other)

Some of these euphemisms such as *u lalana* in (12e) are now also becoming taboo. They have lost their euphemistic character and are regarded as vulgar. This means that what was euphemism in the past may not necessarily be so today and what was taboo in the past may also not be taboo today. For instance, Mohale (2006:3) mentions:

At the moment, condoms are being placed at every public institution across the country, including schools, hospitals, clinics, toilets, etc. Should a parent go to such institutions with a child, the child will normally shout and say “condoms” and may even go further to say, would you like to have one? This will likely embarrass the parent.

It is sometimes imperative to invoke taboo subjects in formal contexts. In the medical profession, for instance, the mentioning of body parts, bodily functions and diseases is inevitable. Yet language still imposes restrictions on the use of such terms. Some of the terms that pose problems in this regard are:

- (13) a. *Tshitungulo*
(Penis)
- b. *Maraho*
(Buttocks)
- c. *Murundo*
(Urine)

These are sensitive words that are not socially acceptable, especially among the elderly. Instead of using these words, the following euphemisms may be utilised to make such references acceptable:

- (14) a. *Vhudzimu*
(Penis)
- b. *Pfuralelo*
(Buttocks)
- c. *Mutambuluwo*
(Urine)

Tshivenda culture views the use of phrases such as *u runda* (to urinate) as vulgar and uncouth. Instead of this expression, the following polite words can be used:

- (15) a. *Ushisha*
(Urinating of children)
- b. *Utambuluwa*
(To take a bath again)
- c. *Uposa lutanga*
(To throw a reed)

In Tshivenda, pregnancy is another area that is characterised by linguistic taboos. Figurative and euphemistic language is preferred to denotative language when pregnancy is discussed:

- (15) a. *Upfukwa nga nwedzi*
(To be skipped by a month)

- b. *Uvha muthu wa thovhele*
(To be the chief's person)

- c. *Uvhifha muvhilini*
(To be ugly in the body)

- d. *Udihwala*
(To carry oneself)

- e. *Ugonya miri*
(To climb trees).

Death is another topic that people will do their utmost to avoid. As death is inevitable, it has to be mentioned in one way or another. This is why Tshivenda uses euphemisms in order to soften the announcement of a death as the following examples prove:

- (16) a. *Uya vhanweni*
(To visit other people)

- b. *Udala*
(To pay a visit)

c. *Uresha vhadzimu*
(To greet the gods)

d. *Uonesa vhathu*
(To bid people farewell)

e. *Usia vhathu*
(To leave people)

f. *Usia shango*
(To leave the country)

In Tshivenda, it will be extremely insensitive to be direct when referring to death. This is why people will do their best to avoid using the expression *o fa* (he or she is dead). Any person who uses such an expression will be regarded as cruel and evil and can simultaneously be associated with witchcraft as the perception in most of Africa is that only witches and wizards revel when anguish is visited upon the people (Kgobe, 2004:53).

To summarize, the fact remains that taboo words do exist in various languages. There may be a tendency to use taboo words as is the norm on TV and films. It must, however, be borne in mind however, that in real-life situation, anyone who uses taboo words would be well advised to know that the majority of people still regard the use of taboo words as a sign of a poor upbringing, immorality, and impoliteness. The lesson is that we all have to choose our words carefully lest the words we utter offend other people and ultimately lead to a communication breakdown.

Conclusion

Tshivenda, like any other language, possesses expressions that are preferred and disliked depending on the context in which they are used. It is, therefore, vital for any speaker to choose his/her words very

carefully lest they embarrass the listeners or the speaker him/herself. It is not enough to possess only grammatical competence while discarding communicative competence in a discourse setting. This is why any effective language learning milieu must include linguistic taboos. Human beings as moral and ethical beings are expected to abide by high standards of courtesy and protocol when it comes to language use. We must accept that some words and expressions are offensive to people and often result in embarrassment, shame and rudeness, and we should try to replace them with palatable ones. More importantly is to convey the message the way it would be understood best without causing unnecessary friction and animosity between people. What all this implies is that speakers must at all times be vigilant against the use of distasteful expressions

Some of the expressions included under linguistic taboos might be offensive and disturbing to listeners or readers. Those of us who deal with language matters might be viewed as subhuman when treating them in this manner. However, if we do not treat them and pretend that they are non-existent, then we should not be surprised when little girls and boys use such linguistic taboos. As people are premised on sound social imperatives, we have no choice, but to undertake studies on linguistic taboos so that children and everybody else should know which words to use and which to avoid. If we do not do this, we do not have the right to claim that we are better and different from the animals.

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Motto

*"The University of Limpopo
for human and environmental
wellness in a rural context finding
solutions for Africa"*