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Taboo in language and discourse:
introducing the volume

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Every language reflects the practices of those who speak it, their surroundings, and livelihoods, what has to be avoided, and what is plainly forbidden and unmentionable — taboo across various languages and cultures. Taboo in language easily translates into practices of avoidance and secrecy. It also has discursive and performative dimensions. As an object of linguistic analysis, studying and describing that is ‘taboo’ may be problematic: the information is hard to elicit, and scholarly writing dispassionately turns ‘taboo’ into a purely academic discussion, while the issues themselves often turn out to be complex and multifaceted. Talking about taboos or bearing witness to

taboos in action places both the ‘speaker’ and the ‘linguist’ under a strain: the practices themselves may turn out to be potentially dangerous practices, and one has to rely on the metapragmatic and the metalinguistic performance rather on what is being said out loud. What does one say and what has to remain unsaid? How do tabooed language practices play out in multiple contexts and different environments, from the Amazonian jungle and the highlands on Papua New Guinea to urban contexts in Congo and Zimbabwe to tourist hot-spots in Kenya and elsewhere? How is taboo inflicted on those who usually are not in the picture – the linguists who write about it?

Taboo as a way of rationalising complex practice, as embodiment and an experience of the environment, as confrontation and reflection: This is what this volume is about.

The papers within this issue are based on a meeting we organised in Spa, the region of the High Fens in Belgium (30 September – 1 October, 2017). The High Fens — a marshy area about an hour’s drive from Cologne — offered a propitious environment for the topic. The misty stretch of the moor was a reminder of the beliefs and taboos many of us grew up with. Under continuous rain, the treacherous paths, lined with withered blackberry bushes, seemed to have hosted a multitude of supernatural phenomena — the unseen presences of the dead and ever-living spirits, where land and water merge and one feels overpowered by Nature’s doom and gloom.

The meeting itself was quite unlike a standard average conference, with regular slots and turns. After a brief walk on the moors — to get into the mood for the mysterious, the unseen, and the unmentionable — we sat around a long table and presented brief squibs on the topics that we thought would be of interest and value. Most of these have been written up and have made their way into this issue.

There is an interesting effect in leaving the campus and the seminar room, not for what we usually call our “field sites”, but for a place that to some of us resembled childhood environments — where we would spend a weekend’s picnic trip — while for others in our group it was exotic and unusual. To meet outside the white cube in which we usually sit and discuss our work made the jaguar spirits of nocturnal forests or the strange and forbidden human body more real and unexotic than these topics of scientific examination usually are in the



Figure 1. The moor of the High Fens (photo AA)

aseptic environment of scholarly research. Perhaps, the presence of the researcher as a more complete person, personal memories weaving into professional experiences, and shared talk that is not rigidly structured by presentation schedules made our topic — taboo in language and discourse — appear more normal, common and average, less exotic and less weird.

And as every language reflects the practices of those who speak it, every scholarly debate on language in its context reflects the practices of those participating in the debate, their positionalities, academic experience, research environment, gender, age, and livelihoods. It seems important to consider taboo in this respect as well: as social and cultural practice that is meaningful for the ways in

which linguists may or may not reveal secret information, speak about taboo language, contribute or not to particular discussions. It is also important to consider the notion of taboo in the context of what is or has been suppressed in linguistics, as a discipline with a complex history, which only now becomes more critically invested in its own heritage.

During our meeting in the moor, much of this translated into stories, or emerged out of them: how we understood that something was secret or forbidden, delicate and touchy, and what this meant for everyday practice. Stories about how knowledge has been achieved, about the alchemy of linguistics, tell much about context and are based on complex intertextual moves: unsaid reference of shared canonical reading and shared discursive spaces, talk about talk, and speech on silence. Nothing of this has been transformed

Figure 2. The alps in the High Fens (photo AS)



into academic texts but resonates in the contributions to the present collection. We assume that this is another interesting effect of leaving the classroom for the wilderness: how this process reveals the power of performance, stage, and image.

This volume contains diverse approaches to taboo as linguistic and discursive practice, behaviour and knowledge. The contributors were free to choose among genres, such as the academic paper, personal reflections from a field diary, or a journalistic essay, so that a collection emerged that offers a more fine-grained understanding of how data on linguistic taboo can be analysed, how ideas about taboo change in the course of time, and how insights into linguistic strategies of talking (or keeping silent) about difficult issues can be obtained. Contributions focus on better-known topics in this field, like name taboo, avoidance language and practices of swearing and insulting, as well as on the dynamics of taboo in new, global settings: linguistic taboo in urban contexts, tourism settings, and the media.

The volume consists of three parts.

Part I opens the field of taboo and secrecy with two contributions that provide an overview of two different linguistic settings: The first contribution is dedicated to taboos in language and social life in Nungon, a language of Papua New Guinea. Hannah Sarvasy discusses taboo concerning the forest, secret codes shared among adolescents and other contexts in which language use indicates difficult topics. A similarly broad perspective characterises the second contribution, Luca Ciucci and the late Gabriella Erica Pia's study on taboo in Ayoreo, a language spoken in Bolivia and Paraguay. Both authors combine what can be found in notes on their own field observations,

materials from missionary archives and ethnographic data, and personal conversations in order to come to an understanding of the complexity of taboo and secrecy in a small and marginalised community.

The chapters in part II take a closer look at particular practices and taboos, which seem to be of special meanings in the respective languages and communities: Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald explores the ways in which the unseen and supernatural can be expressed in Tariana, a language of Brazil that is characterised by its rich evidentials. Katarzyna I. Wojtylak in turn takes a closer look at the language of the nocturnal jungle in Murui, spoken in Colombia and Peru. Shamanism and hunting play an important role here, as well as in the languages discussed in the next chapter, which deals with taboos surrounding dogs and jaguars in languages and societies of the Amazon. Simon E. Overall shows that the introduction of the domestic dog in the colonial era led to the emergence of taboos that highlight notions of intimacy and transgression of private and spiritual borders. Andrea Hollington is interested in taboos concerning intimate relationships as well, but approaches this topic in an entirely different way, namely by turning the gaze to in-law taboo, a "classic" in anthropological linguistics, as she writes. In chiShona, a language of Zimbabwe, in-law taboo involves complex avoidance practices in language and social behaviour. Another form of border-violation is explored by Nico Nassenstein in his study on the practices and indexicalities of poisoning. In Kivu Swahili, a variety of Swahili spoken in the DR Congo, discourse on poison touches upon specific taboos, concerning body politics and fears of witchcraft. Fear turns out to relate to the challenges of daily life experiences in a

postcolonial environment characterised by ruptures and violence, as well as conviviality and continuity. In the following contribution, which explores the intimate aspects of taboo in Wolof, a language spoken in Senegal, Fatou Cisse Kane is interested in fear as well: of social inadequacy and loss of face. In her contribution, the public aspect of private affairs is the focus. In the next chapter, by Asangba Reginald Taluah, everything is public discourse: taboo is a ubiquitous concept, which is referred to in proverbs, forms of ritual communication and swearing alike. In Kasem, spoken in Ghana, taboo and secrecy are closely connected with language-as-art and constitute a part of identity discourses.

Part III consists of contributions that discuss linguistic taboo as an aspect of cultural mobility. Angelika Mietzner and Anne Storch discuss the violation of taboos at a Kenyan beach, where tourists and hosts share difficult encounters that are shaped by neo-colonial dynamics as well as personal biographical experiences. Janine Traber is interested in tourism as a field of intercultural encounters as well, but is not so much writing about talk, but the absence of it. Silence, she argues, is much more than part of elite tourism designs, but also reflects taboos surrounding body and boundary concepts. Sara Zavaree takes a look at a tourism setting where the careful management of boundaries does not seem to play a role, namely package tourism. She turns the gaze at phallic images and objects that are part of the average assortment of cheaply marketed souvenirs. Yet, she argues, this is not simply due to the liminality associated with the tourism space: the penis has complex indexi-

calities in these southern places, referring to coloniality and racist concepts of the Other. The volume is concluded by Helma Pasch's reflections on fieldwork and taboo violation, the inescapable awkwardness that results from the presence of texts of the past, colonial legacy and pain. Her critical and reflexive text on fieldwork on Zande and her cooperation with Congolese colleagues reminds us of the complex and violent historical entanglements that remain relevant and present.

We want to offer a word of thanks to all contributors to this issue, as well as to our colleagues who joined us in the High Fens and contributed to this collection not by writing a chapter but by providing us with a stimulating intellectual exchange. We are equally grateful to all those who bear with us all the time we fail to understand the meanings of taboo and secrecy in their places. Finally, we owe lots of thanks to Frederik Weck and Jan Peters for their great assistance in getting this volume together.