

A Psycholinguistic Study of Slovenian Taboo Words: What Makes a Word Taboo?

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Background: Despite the ubiquity of taboo words in everyday language, we do not know much about Slovenian taboo words, as most of the studies are done on English speaking population. This poses a problem since taboos are inherently defined by their sociocultural background, which is limited in most small studies, which in turn leads to a constrained description of taboo words (Sulpizio et al., 2024). The absence of a universally agreed-upon taxonomy and the ongoing ambiguity regarding specific categories of taboo words (Jay, 2009; Stapleton, 2010) underscore the necessity for comprehensive research in this domain. While the criteria that categorize a word as taboo remain elusive, it has been proposed that emotional aspects play a pivotal role (Jay & Jay, 2015; Hansen et al., 2017). We hypothesized that the findings would show a high number of taboo words with sexual reference, insults, and slurs, and that taboo words are defined by high arousal, tabooeness, offensiveness, concreteness, and age of acquisition, as well as negative valency. Based on findings of Nežmah (2011), the origin of Slovenian taboo words can be attributed to Slavic and German origin, however, we hypothesized that more recent taboo words also originate from English.

Objective: This study aimed to collect and categorize Slovenian taboo words, explore foreign cultural influences, and determine which psycholinguistic variables could define taboo words for a larger international study "Taboo language across the globe: A multi-lab study."

Methodology: In the first experiment, we gathered Slovenian taboo words (252 items) and categorized them. We compared origins of the most frequent lexical items and analyzed the demographic data. In the second part of our study, we conducted 6 experiments with the taboo words we collected and neutral fillers (125 items) to gather best-worst ratings for different psycholinguistic variables of taboo words. We calculated correlations between these variables and other measures (see Table 1).

Results and discussion: Early analyses of responses from 253 participants (51% women) with mean age of 22.08 (SD = 3.24) showed a similarity to Slavic languages with a strong influence of neighboring cultures, and predominance of words with sexual references, followed by insults and slurs.

While positive correlations between semantic dimensions and other measures (see Table 1) indicate a tendency to acquire the most tabooed and the most arousing words later in life,

heightened arousal of tabooed words, as well as heightened tabooeness and arousal of offensive words.

Negative correlations, on the other hand, indicate that tabooed and offensive words are not pleasant, that we acquire concrete, unpleasant and uncommon words later in life and that the frequency of tabooer and more offensive words diminishes in the corpus.

Table 1

Correlations Between Psycholinguistic Variables and Frequency in the Corpus

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Age of Acquisition	—						
2. Arousal	.43***	—					
3. Concreteness	-.34***	-.01	—				
4. Valency	-.34***	-.36***	.15*	—			
5. Tabooeness	.60***	.69***	-.04	-.55***	—		
6. Offensiveness	.28***	.37***	-.23***	-.74***	.57***	—	
7. Frequency in corpus	-.36***	-.18**	.37***	.32***	-.27***	-.36***	—

*** indicates $p < 0.001$; ** indicates $p < 0.01$; * indicates $p < 0.05$

Key words:

Taboo words, Slovenian, Slavic, Taboos, Swearing, Psycholinguistics

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