What Can Taboo Words Tell Us About Language Choices? Saudi Females' Attitudes towards Taboo Words in English and Arabic

DOI: https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes.v25i2.870

Maram Alzubaidi
Umm Al-Qura University, Saudi Arabia

Anikó Hatoss
University of New South Wales, Australia

Received: 10.8.2024 Accepted: 11.2.2025 Published: 2.6.2025

Abstract: This paper contributes to ongoing sociolinguistic research on the intricate relationship between attitudes and language practices in bilingual and multilingual contexts. The study aimed to investigate the attitudes of Arabic-English bilingual Saudi females towards taboo words and the factors influencing the construction of these attitudes. A mixed-methods approach was employed, involving an online survey and interviews. The survey data were analysed using paired samples t-test, while NVivo software facilitated the thematic analysis of the interviews. The results revealed contrasting attitudes; although Arabic taboo words were rated as more acceptable in the survey, interviewees expressed that English taboo words were more acceptable. The study also highlights the significance of factors such as the semantic context of words, gender dynamics and the relationship between interlocutors and modes of communication in determining the perceived weight and acceptance of taboo words.

Keywords: attitudes, bilinguals, emotional force, language choice, Saudi Arabia, taboo words

1. Introduction

While previous research on language attitudes has addressed a wide range of topics, few studies have specifically explored taboo words and their perception among bilingual speakers of Arabic and English. Taboo words were selected as the focus of this research because they are often used to express emotions or elicit varying emotional responses from both the speaker and the listener. Consequently, studying taboo words and language preferences provides insight into how emotional factors may influence language choice. Taboos and swear words, for instance, can provoke anxiety and negative feelings, while other words may be considered neutral (e.g. door and book), negative (e.g. death and disease) or positive (e.g. happy and freedom) (Dewaele 2004). An increasing body of research has shown that negatively valenced words (e.g. taboo words) elicit greater anxiety in speakers' mother tongues (Harris, Ayçíçeğí and Gleason 2003), and the emotional effects may extend, albeit to a lesser degree, to languages learned in late childhood (Räsänen and Pine 2014). Attitudes dynamically influence the frequency of language use, the determination of context appropriateness and language maintenance and inheritance (Kircher and Zipp 2022). Therefore, this study aims to determine

whether Arabic-English bilinguals in Saudi Arabia exhibit any language preference and what emotional impact taboo words have for them in their two languages (L1 Arabic and L2 English).

Language attitudes and emotionality are discussed in this paper within the context of language choices. Prior studies have shown that bilinguals often decide which language to use based on the sensitivity of the topic and the emotional arousal associated with that language (Gobert 2015). Thus, emotionality is a critical factor in determining language choice in bilingual contexts. According to Pavlenko (2008), bilinguals tend to use L1 due to its superior emotional resonance, as L1 feels more satisfying and natural. Conversely, they may use L2 when communicating taboo or swear words to avoid feelings of guilt and discomfort (Pavlenko 2008). Palvenko (2005) argued that the emotional superiority of L1 can be attributed to the fact that L1 is the language of primary socialisation, which evokes childhood traumas and, in some contexts, can trigger memories of conflict. In contrast, languages acquired later are typically learned in a more neutral context, resulting in a weaker emotional impact. Therefore, the emotionality of L1 and L2 is asymmetrical, and the use of each language elicits different emotions. Consequently, language, emotionality and attitudes are deeply interconnected and work simultaneously, making it advantageous to investigate them together.

The use of taboo words is also linked to how language learners project their identities, as speakers' attitudes are influenced by cultural, personal and professional identities, as well as various possible selves (Dörnyei 2005). Self-concepts encompass the thoughts individuals hold about themselves (Oyserman and Fryberg 2006), including reflections on who they were, who they are and who they can become. Research focused on possible selves has explored questions such as: '(a) What social and personal factors give rise to specific kinds of possible selves? and, more recently, (b) How do possible selves influence the regulation of behaviour?' (Hamman et al. 2010: 1349). Therefore, the possible selves theory is useful for understanding the connection between language behaviour and attitudes. This theory will be applied here to elucidate how Saudi speakers' dispositions towards taboo words reveal certain desired selves, particularly when addressing stigmatised language.

Following the tradition of recent research in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics, a mixed-methods approach will be adopted (Kircher and Zipp 2022). Both quantitative and qualitative data collection instruments will be employed to gain a deeper understanding of the issue at hand. This study aims to examine the emotional impact of taboo words in both Arabic and English, as well as individuals' attitudes towards these terms and the role of language choice and to explore the factors that shape these attitudes. Specifically, this research seeks to ascertain whether Arabic-English bilingual females exhibited distinct attitudes towards specific taboo terms in each language and the basis on which these attitudes were cultivated. The research questions are listed below:

1. How do Arabic-English bilingual adult females react to taboo terms in both Arabic and English? Are there any differences in their reactions?
2. What factors affect attitudes towards taboo terms in Arabic and English?

2. Literature review

Theories of language attitudes encompass feelings, emotions, belief systems and values (Henerson, Morris and Fitz-Gibbon 1987). Language attitudes traditionally refer to 'any affective, cognitive or behavioural index of evaluative reactions towards different varieties and … their users' (Kircher and Zipp 2022:4). Affect refers to the evaluation—whether positive or negative—of any object (Robinson, Smith-Lovin and Wisecup 2006). According to Sarnoff (cited in Garrett, Coupland and Williams 2003: 3), an attitude is "a disposition to react favourably or unfavourably to a class of objects", comprising cognitive, affective and behavioural elements. This definition indicates that attitudes relate to more than affect alone and extend to thoughts and behaviours. Gass and Seiter (cited in Garrett 2010: 24) affirmed that studying attitudes in isolation from behaviour would be neither efficient nor effective. Thus, to consolidate and enhance the understanding of attitudes towards an object, it is essential to consider the associated internal and external processes. In the context of this study, we seek to understand how individuals perceive and process stigmatised words (i.e. taboo words) and how these words are perceived by others. This investigation provides insight into the cultivated behaviours and attitudes surrounding these terms (cf. Hamdan, Al-Madanat and Hamdan 2023).

The study of language attitudes necessitates an interdisciplinary approach, incorporating linguistic and social-psychological dimensions. One methodological challenge in sociolinguistic studies of language attitudes is that the three components (affection, cognition and behaviour) are not always consistent, particularly in bi/multilingual communities. This inconsistency means that speakers may hold negative feelings about a language while simultaneously possessing a positive rationale for its value, motivating them to learn it for practical benefits. For example, Oakes (cited in Kircher and Zipp 2022: 4) noted that Quebecers, despite having a weaker emotional attachment to English compared to French, recognised the significance of English as a global language. This recognition, in turn, motivated them to learn and use English for socio-economic reasons. Group stereotypes (judging others), social group membership (positioning oneself and others within certain social groups) and other sociolinguistic and social-psychological phenomena are triggered by attitudes towards language varieties. These attitudes contribute to current and future behaviours (Garrett et al. 2003). Attitudes towards languages and their varieties are closely tied to attitudes towards groups of people (Chambers and Schilling 2018). For instance, individuals often attribute personality characteristics to speakers based on linguistic features; for example, Germans may be perceived as harsh, Frenchmen as romantic and Southern Americans as lazy (Chambers and Schilling 2018). This underscores the importance of monitoring attitudes towards linguistic forms and their social implications.

Language attitudes are also studied to predict future behaviours rather than to reliably assert how people will react in a given situation at present. For example, attitudes towards a language are fundamental in the study of language vitality and language death (Baker 1992). In the context of the current research, understanding attitudes towards English provides insights into how this language is valued by Saudi speakers. While English is regarded as a prestigious language in the Middle East, leading to positive attitudes and an increase in English learners (Gobert 2015), this situation can change over time. Prior literature has revealed that Saudi Arabians' attitudes towards English have not always been positive (Gobert 2015). Furthermore, language attitudes can vary across subgroups within society. For example, Al-Shuwaikhat (1985) studied Saudi Arabians' attitudes towards English, categorising respondents into three main groups: (a) graduates of technically oriented universities, (b) graduates of Islamically oriented universities and (c) graduates of generally oriented universities. The study's findings revealed that graduates from technically or generally oriented universities exhibited a stronger attachment to English, positively influencing their attitudes towards introducing English to their preschool-aged children in Saudi Arabia. Conversely, graduates from Islamically oriented universities expressed a lesser preference for introducing English to their children, citing concerns that an attraction to Western and American culture and language creates a cultural inferiority complex among Muslims and undermines their Islamic identity. The author suggested that Islamic conservatism and cultural defensiveness may contribute to this phenomenon, as these individuals may strive to maintain their cultural and religious identity (Al-Shuwaikhat 1985). These insights informed the rationale and design of this study and helped us understand the methodological limitations that may bias the study of language attitudes.

A second major theoretical dimension of this study is the sociolinguistic theory of normativity in language use. Taboo words, by definition, are terms that are forbidden or banned for cultural or religious reasons (Gobert 2015). To convey their powerful effect, Dewaele (2004) likened taboo words to nitroglycerin. Failure to understand the sensitivity of such words within a particular community can lead to significant consequences, such as job loss (Gobert 2015). Both native and non-native speakers approach these terms with caution due to their considerable emotional influence on both the speaker and the listener. This research also incorporates psycholinguistic studies that explore the relationship between language and emotion. Psycholinguists have significantly contributed to our understanding of the emotional resonance of languages and attitudes. Conceiving attitudes as psychological constructs complicates access to them and promotes a broad debate regarding the best methodological approach (Garrett 2010). Studies employing Stroop tasks have found significant delays in responses to taboo and negative words compared to neutral words in both native (L1) and non-native (L2) languages among unbalanced bilinguals (those with differing linguistic proficiency in each language) (e.g. Sutton et al. 2007; Eilola and Havelka 2011).

In bilingual and multilingual contexts, people's attitudes towards taboos are not uniform. Several studies have shown that taboo terms elicit greater emotional arousal in L1 than in L2. For example, Harris et al. (2003) utilised psychophysiological instruments (skin conductance response tests) to examine unbalanced bilinguals' reactivity towards taboos and reprimands presented in both L1 and L2. The authors concluded that recalling these words was significantly more effective when communicated in L2. Interestingly, several studies have demonstrated that when bilinguals learn a target language after preschool age, taboo words tend to generate less anxiety in L2 compared to L1 (Dewaele 2004). One effective way to mitigate the embarrassment associated with emotionally charged materials is through euphemisms. Speakers often fill lexical gaps when discussing tabooed words by employing euphemisms, as communication on such topics may be unavoidable (Al-Khatib 1995). Another strategy to alleviate embarrassment is code-switching. When addressing emotionally sensitive words, bilinguals typically use L2 to convey a sense of detachment. This is supported by Bond's (2001) findings, which indicate that Chinese undergraduate students discuss embarrassing topics more frequently in English than in Chinese, emphasising the detachment function of code-switching. The author attributed this difference to the emotional resonance of each language, demonstrating that the second language is usually learned in a more neutral context, while the first language, or mother tongue, is acquired in a more emotionally charged environment (Bond 2001). Similarly, Javier and Marcos (1989) suggested that shifting to L2 could serve as a means to avoid anxiety-provoking linguistic items. Based on this evidence, investigating linguistic taboos may be more effective in intercultural contexts.

How bilingual (and multilingual) individuals deploy their linguistic resources and navigate social norms and expectations remains one of the most intriguing questions in bilingualism and multilingualism studies. This study employs the possible selves theory (Dörnyei 2005) to understand the connection between the use and acceptance of taboo words and one's perception of their 'ought to selves'. Dörnyei (cited in Chen 2012: 51) suggested that ideal and ought selves are not solely determined by the individual; rather, they emerge from compliance with socio-contextual pressures, specifically the pressure to conform to acceptable language behaviour.

In summary, the analysis of previous work on language attitudes and their impact on behaviour underscores the importance of this topic in bilingual contexts and its significant implications for language choices and practices in everyday situations. It shows how individuals' thoughts, beliefs and emotions influence their actions and behaviours. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the field by surveying Arabic-English bilinguals' attitudes towards taboo terms in both languages and the factors that foster these attitudes. The significant differences between these languages, including their distinct sound systems, syntax and typology, represent another critical factor in understanding the associated emotional resonance beyond any potential activation of similar words. This understanding provides clearer perspectives on the related attitudes.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

In the initial phase, 48 Saudi females, predominantly enrolled in master's and PhD programmes at various Australian universities, participated in an online survey. Most had spent over three years in Australia and identified Arabic as their primary language (L1), while English was their second language (L2). Their English proficiency was deemed adequate (with an average IELTS score of 6.0), enabling comprehension of the taboo words studied. Participants commonly acquired English through schooling or residency in an English-speaking country and frequently used English in familial and professional settings or routine activities such as shopping.

In the subsequent phase of the study (the interviews), five Saudi females were recruited. However, the analysis only considered the interviews of four participants due to unclear recordings from the fifth participant, leading to her exclusion from the study. The selection process followed convenience sampling. Sara, Hala, Huda and Amy (pseudonyms used for anonymity) were selected among Saudi females pursuing postgraduate studies (mostly master's, except for Amy, who was pursuing a PhD) across diverse specialisations at separate Australian universities. The focus on females is justified by several studies indicating that females are generally more sensitive to the emotional force of taboo words than males (Dewaele 2004). Additionally, as girls have been found to be more attuned to others' feedback and judgement, it is suggested that their possible selves function more influentially as self-regulators (Oyserman and Fryberg 2006), which is deeply tied to the topic at hand. All four interviewees participated in one-on-one online interviews with the first author via Microsoft Teams.

3.2 Research approach and design

The study employed a mixed-methods approach for data collection, utilising both online surveys and interviews. Given the exploratory nature of the research objectives, this methodology is particularly appropriate. Combining quantitative and qualitative data collection methods is critical for understanding trends, attitudes and the interconnectedness among variables, significantly aiding in yielding well-validated results (Burns 2009). The application of quantitative methods generates an objective understanding of phenomena based on statistical analysis. In contrast, qualitative methods gather information that explains and clarifies quantitative results, providing a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and motivations (Burns 2009).

During the initial data collection phase, an anonymous online survey was conducted using Qualtrics. Participation was voluntary and adhered to the ethical research standards set by the university (HC220330). All participants were requested to complete the 'Taboo Words and Identity Questionnaire'. The questionnaire comprised three segments, entirely presented in English. The first part involved 13 multiple-choice questions designed to gather linguistic and demographic information from participants. The second section focused on identifying Arabic taboo words and their English equivalents. Participants were

tasked with rating the acceptability of 15 Arabic and English words in everyday conversations, utilising a 5-point Likert scale *(ranging from 1=totally unacceptable to 5=perfectly acceptable)*. This section concluded with two multiple-choice questions regarding participants' language preferences when using taboo words. The final segment explored attitudes towards learning and using taboo words, with participants asked to rate 21 questions on a 5-point Likert scale *(ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree).* These questions were adapted from Gardner's (2004) Attitude/Motivation Test Battery and Harris et al. (2003), with some modifications.

In the second phase, individual interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams with four selected participants—a commonly used qualitative data collection method in studies on language attitudes (Brubaker 2003; Abdullah and Altun 2021). These interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim by the first author. All questions were posed in English, while respondents were allowed to respond in either their native language (Arabic, L1) or their second language (English, L2). The interviews followed a semi-structured format; although guided by prepared questions, they remained open-ended. To establish rapport and trust, the first author initiated the interviews with ice-breaking inquiries about the participants' residency in Australia and their educational backgrounds. This approach created a relaxed environment conducive to more candid responses (Dörnyei 2010). Towards the conclusion of the interviews, participants were invited to share any additional comments or issues, a technique known to elicit more comprehensive data (Dörnyei 2010). On average, the interviews lasted approximately 15 minutes each.

3.3 Data analysis

The survey data were analysed using paired samples t-test to identify differences in the acceptability of taboo words and attitudes towards their usage across various occasions and contexts. Simultaneously, the interviews were thematically analysed due to time constraints. The first author coded all interviews, encompassing both Arabic and English segments. The Arabic segments were subsequently translated into English by the first author, who leveraged their native proficiency in Arabic and their linguistics bachelor's degree. The translated texts were then processed using NVivo software for thematic analysis. Initially, individual participant responses were scrutinised separately, followed by a collective analysis to ascertain consistency and disparities among the responses.

4. Results

4.1 Survey results

Based on the 5-point Likert scale scores, a quantitative analysis was applied to summarise the responses to two main questions. The first question aimed to measure the acceptability of taboo words in Arabic and their equivalents in English, while the second sought to understand the respondents' position on the use of forbidden words in both languages.

Question 1: To what extent do you feel the following Arabic and English words are accepted in daily conversations (i.e. using Arabic words in Arabic conversations and English words in English conversations)? (1=totally unacceptable, 2=unacceptable, 3=neutral, 4=acceptable, 5=perfectly acceptable).

Respondents were required to rate six pairs of taboo words (Arabic and their equivalent English ones) according to their acceptability. A two-tailed paired samples t-test was conducted to identify significant differences between the two languages. Forty-five responses were analysed for each pair. The results indicate that Arabic taboo words were more accepted and perceived as less intense than their English taboos (see Table 1 for the mean and SD scores of the taboo words and Table 2 for the paired samples t-test scores). The Arabic taboo words (مهبل، اغتصاب، أحمق، نهدين) were rated as more acceptable than their English equivalents (vagina, rape, asshole and boobs). However, the reverse was reversed with (bitch and period), which were slightly more accepted than their Arabic equivalents (عاهرة & الدورة الشهرية). These results suggest that four out of six taboo words were significantly more accepted in Arabic than in English, indicating that English taboo words tend to elicit more negative feelings than their Arabic counterparts.

Table 1. Taboo words: Level of acceptance (1–5) mean and scores

	N	Mean	SD	SE	Coefficient of Variation
مهبل	45	2.600	1.250	0.186	0.481
Vagina	45	2.200	1.160	0.173	0.527
اغتصاب	45	2.422	1.097	0.164	0.453
Rape	45	2.000	1.022	0.152	0.511
نهدين	45	2.733	1.031	0.154	0.377
Boobs	45	2.289	1.100	0.164	0.481
عاهرة	45	1.133	0.505	0.075	0.445
Bitch	45	1.267	0.618	0.092	0.488
الدورة الشهرية	45	4.000	0.853	0.127	0.213
Period	45	3.822	0.860	0.128	0.225
أحمق	45	2.556	0.990	0.148	0.387
Asshole	45	1.911	0.900	0.134	0.471

Table 2. Taboo words: Paired samples t-test

Measure 1	Measure 2	t	df	p	Mean Difference	SE Difference	95% CI for Mean Difference		Cohen's d
							Lower	Upper	
مهبل	- Vagina	2.211	44	0.032*	0.400	0.181	0.035	0.765	0.330
اغتصاب	- Rape	3.376	44	0.002**	0.422	0.125	0.170	0.674	0.503
نهدين	- Boobs	3.798	44	<.001*	0.444	0.117	0.209	0.680	0.566
عاهرة	- Bitch	-1.232	44	0.225	-0.133	0.108	-0.351	0.085	-0.184
الدورة الشهرية	- Period	1.665	44	0.103	0.178	0.107	-0.037	0.393	0.248
أحمق	- Asshole	3.821	44	<.001**	0.644	0.169	0.305	0.984	0.570

Note. Student's *t*-test. * p<0.05, **p<0.01

At the end of this section, respondents were required to choose their preferred language for using taboo words in Arabic and English conversations (Arabic, English, both languages or neither/I do not use taboo words). A total of 42 responses were generated. In Arabic conversations, more than half of the participants (59.52%) reported not using taboo words in either language (choosing 'neither/I do not use taboo words'). Conversely, 21.43 percent reported preferring Arabic. Similarly, in English conversations, the majority chose 'neither/I do not use taboo words' (66.67%), while 19.05 percent preferred English taboo words. This indicates a close correspondence in the respondents' attitudes towards forbidden words in general (see Table 3 for detailed percentages).

Table 3. Preferred language for using taboo words in conversation

		In Arabic Conversations		In English Conversations	
#	Answer	%	Count	%	Count
1	English	9.52%	4	19.05%	8
2	Arabic	21.43%	9	7.14%	3
3	Both languages	9.52%	4	7.14%	3
4	Neither/I do not use taboo words	59.52%	25	66.67%	28
	Total	100%	42	100%	42

Question 2: Respondents were asked to rate a number of sentences based on their level of agreement (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree).

The answers can be divided into two main sections:

4.1.1 Attitudes towards learning English taboo words

Although almost all the participants (40 out of 45) aimed to learn as much English vocabulary as possible, their positions differed considerably when asked about learning English taboos; only 12 participants (26.67%) were in favour of learning these words.

Regarding the inclusion of English taboos in education, over half of the participants expressed disagreement; 24.39 percent strongly disagreed, while 34.15 percent disagreed. A similar position was observed concerning the introduction of Arabic taboos in educational settings, with 33.33 percent strongly disagreeing and 34.95 percent disagreeing. Ignoring taboo words was a common reaction, as 35.56 percent ignored taboos when learning English, and 33.33 percent did so when watching English movies. This suggests that learners' motivation and interest in learning English were insufficient to encourage them to learn these stigmatised linguistic items. They rejected these terms both inside and outside the classroom and expressed a negative attitude towards them (see Table 4).

Table 4. Attitudes towards learning English taboo words

Question	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neither Agree nor Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree		Total
I have a strong desire to know as much English vocabulary as possible	2.22%	1	2.22%	1	6.67%	3	44.44%	20	44.44%	20	45
I do not mind learning English taboo words	13.33%	6	24.44%	11	22.22%	10	26.67%	12	13.33%	6	45
Introducing English taboo words in educational books does not bother me	24.39%	10	34.15%	14	26.83%	11	12.20%	5	2.44%	1	41
Introducing Arabic taboo words in educational books does not bother me	33.33%	14	30.95%	13	21.43%	9	9.52%	4	4.76%	2	42

When I am learning English, I ignore taboo words	6.67%	3	15.56%	7	35.56%	16	35.56%	16	6.67%	3	45
When I am watching English movies, I ignore taboo words	11.90%	5	23.81%	10	26.19%	11	33.33%	14	4.76%	2	42

4.1.2 Attitudes towards self and others using taboo words

Most respondents denied using English taboo words frequently, with 66.67 percent strongly disagreeing. Regarding the use of English taboo words in public or on social media, most found it uncomfortable; 57.78 percent strongly disagreed with using them in public, while 57.14 percent strongly disagreed with their use on social media. Relatively similar, albeit less intense, positions were observed concerning the use of English taboo words among friends, with 43.18 percent finding it uncomfortable. The attitudes towards Arabic taboo words did not show a significant difference. Using Arabic taboos in public or on social media elicited negative feelings, with 51.11 percent and 58.54 percent, respectively, finding it significantly annoying in each scenario. Notably, while the usage of taboos in public provoked more negative feelings when communicated in English than in Arabic, the reverse was true in the social media context. For most respondents, using Arabic taboos with friends was also discomforting, with 33.33 percent disagreeing and 31.11 percent strongly disagreeing. Overall, respondents exhibited negative attitudes and feelings towards using taboo words in both languages and across different contexts. Their responses implied a general unacceptance and disapproval of these terms, indicating a reluctance to use them.

Almost all participants disagreed with the statement that others' use of English taboos in public is not bothersome; 31.11 percent strongly disagreed, and 46.67 percent disagreed. A similar trend was observed regarding social media, where 35.71 percent strongly disagreed and 50 percent disagreed. The use of Arabic taboos in public or on social media elicited even greater negativity; for public usage, 46.67 percent strongly disagreed, and 46.67 percent disagreed; for social media usage, 43.90 percent strongly disagreed, while 43.90 percent disagreed. This indicates that participants consistently held negative attitudes and feelings towards using Arabic and English taboo words, regardless of context or mode of communication. However, the use of Arabic taboos by others provoked more significant levels of distress compared to English, whereas self-use of taboos in both languages was almost evenly disapproved. Finally, when comparing perception and production, participants reported significantly more negative

attitudes regarding the output of taboo words in both languages. At the end of this section, participants were asked to suggest appropriate contexts for using taboo words. Twelve respondents identified scientific domains as suitable contexts for these words, believing they should be used solely for educational purposes, such as raising awareness, and in medical situations, such as diagnosis.

4.2 Interview results

To gain an in-depth understanding of the survey responses and participants' opinions and attitudes regarding taboo terms, four participants were interviewed:

Table 5. Participants' demographic information

Participant	Education	Residency	Social Network	Dominant Language
Sara	Master's in public health in Sydney	4 years	Saudi friends	Arabic
Hala	Master's in computer science in Sydney	3 years	Saudi friends	Arabic
Amy	PhD in education in Melbourne	5 years	Arabic and English friends (for academic and casual purposes)	Arabic
Huda	Master's in TESOL in Sydney	4 years	Arabic and English friends (for academic and casual purposes)	Arabic

Two main themes emerged from the interviews are as follows:

4.2.1 The emotional force of taboo words across languages

There was a general consensus among the interviewees that the emotional force of taboo words varies depending on the language of communication. The Arabic forbidden words and their English equivalents evoke different emotions and are not equally accepted, even within the same linguistic community. Although the interviewees agreed that taboo words carry negative connotations in both Arabic and English, their acceptance is greater in English. This finding aligns with prior studies indicating that taboo words in L2 do not possess the same emotional weight as those in L1 (e.g. Bond 2001; Dewaele 2004). The interviewees noted that using English taboo words seems to diminish their genuine negativity, rendering them more humorous than offensive. These words are more readily accepted in specific contexts, particularly when they are not spoken in the interlocutor's native language.

Here is Hala's narrative (Excerpt 1) that exemplifies this perspective:

Excerpt 1: Hala

> The same meaning, but not the same acceptance. So if you say it in Arabic, they would, they wouldn't accept it as a joke. They would think that you say that and you mean that so why you said it. It's not acceptable in Arabic, but if you said it in English with Arabic people … especially my friends that I'm dealing with them every day, so it's okay because they understand it's a joke [and understand that] I didn't mean that… That's it might say BITCH in Arabi- in English, but I can't said it in Arabic. They will be angry. But they will accept it in English.

The interviewees partly attributed this decrease in negativity to their weaker attachment to English. Acquiring English after preschool age arguably resulted in the interviewees developing a more tenuous emotional connection with English compared to Arabic (Dewaele 2004). For instance, Huda highlighted that their deeper connection and understanding of Arabic taboo words heightened their sensitivity to these words, a sensitivity that is somewhat limited in English words.

Excerpt 2: Huda

> I think in English sometimes … doesn't have the … bad feeling the same as in Arabic. … I think it's because it's my first language so I would feel it because I know all … the word and the … culture behind it so … I have like deep understanding about this word so I would feel it more but say it in English sometimes (.) because … we know … only the surface so we don't have deep … understand[ing] … of the culture … behind this word.

4.2.2 Factors affecting taboo words' emotionality and attitudes

The influence of the internet and social media is believed to contribute to the spread and acceptance of English taboos. Frequent exposure to these banned words has diminished their negative connotations and somewhat normalised their usage. Sara (Excerpt 3) articulated this clearly:

Excerpt 3: Sara

> **Sara:** [Taboo words are] WAY more to way too easier [in English]. Maybe because of the influence of the media [which] make it sounds like (.) it is OK to say it. …applications [like] Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok [that] everyone nowadays is using … and: EVEN MOVIES, not just those applications. The movies (.) allowing are all using … those terms and TABOO WORDS and (.) make it sounds like comfortable way: and daily uses
>
> **Interviewer:** Yeah, they doesn't seem like taboo words anymore
>
> **Sara:** (.) Yeah

The gender of the interlocutors is another decisive factor. All four interviewees agreed that the use of taboo words in both languages is significantly more accepted and easier in same-gender contexts.

Excerpt 4: Amy

> **Amy:** I think [with] females [would be] easier I feel like female would be more tolerant …We have our identity built in the way that a woman … don't curse.

Excerpt 5: Huda

> **Huda:** Yeah I believe … gender has a huge impact on that … in our community we do have … more like judgments ((on[2])) *females* when they use these … taboo word[s] yeah because *females* I think … have a lot of constraints… *As a female* I think I would be judged if I say that to males as I said, because female[s] are putting into like certain picture ((and[2])) … they try to ((not[2])) break that.

These narratives highlight the interviewees' internal conflict. On the one hand, they acknowledge the sensitivity of taboo words as negative and offensive linguistic items. On the other hand, they still use them as a tool for entertainment or to express anger. This conflict represents their possible selves—caught between the discouragement of the use of such language and the ideal polite self they aspire to embody. This may explain why they consistently assert that the use of these words should be limited to close friends, as illustrated by Sara (Excerpt 6):

Excerpt 6: Sara (lines 58–60)

> It's gonna be with VERY: close friends [laughter] Like we say it in Arabic (intimate friends or very close friends). That … you are 100 percent they will not misinterpret whatever you are thinking is wrong or you are misbehaving, or you are not having well manners.

Sara even switched to Arabic to emphasise the sensitivity of the issue and the narrow context for using these words. She also underscored the importance of others' opinions and judgements about her, supporting the previously mentioned idea.

In conclusion, the prevailing attitude towards taboo words is predominantly negative and unfavourable. The notable difference between participants' ratings of the emotional weight of taboos in both languages (either Arabic over English, as expressed in the interviews, or English over Arabic, as indicated in the survey) can be attributed to the individual words. The examples of taboo words provided by the interviewees varied from those introduced in the questionnaire. Thus, while the overall attitude may be generalised for both languages, the emotional weight of these words requires more careful interpretation.

5. Discussion

The current study was conducted to explore Saudi bilingual females' perceptions of and attitudes towards Arabic and English taboo words, as well as the factors influencing these attitudes. Both quantitative and qualitative data reveal conflicting responses and attitudes. In the survey, respondents rated most of the English taboo words introduced as less acceptable than their Arabic equivalents. They expressed unfavourable attitudes towards learning these words and generally preferred to ignore them. When engaging in conversation, bilinguals preferred using taboo words in the language of the conversation (i.e. Arabic taboos in Arabic conversations). This preference contradicts the findings of Bond (2001), who asserted that individuals tend to switch to L2 when discussing embarrassing topics to create distance and convey a sense of detachment. Respondents' negative attitudes extended to classroom learning and beyond; the majority disfavoured learning taboos in both languages. In the interviews, despite the marginal similarity in the emotional force of taboos across languages, a marked change in attitude was observed. Interviewees asserted that conversing with stigmatised words was significantly easier in L2 (see Excerpt 3). This finding aligns with previous research indicating that bilinguals often use L2 to communicate embarrassing topics (Bond 2001) and that greater anxiety is occasioned in speakers' L1 (Harris et al. 2003). Additionally, survey responses revealed that Arabic taboos (the respondents' L1) are perceived as significantly more bothersome and stigmatised. However, the difference between the data sets arises from the modes of communication: while the interviewees emphasised production, the survey responses concentrated on perception. It is also important to note that the interviewees mentioned some taboo words that differed from those introduced in the survey. This divergence, along with the differing manners, may explain the contradictions in the findings. Therefore, investigating taboo words should also consider individual linguistic items (the lexicon) and means of interaction (perception versus production) to gain a deeper understanding.

Our data suggest that continuous exposure to taboo words on social media has diminished the sensitivity associated with them. Semantic bleaching refers to the process whereby a lexical item gradually loses its original meaning over time (Traugott 2006; Chambers and Schilling 2018). As a result, the semantic content of taboo words becomes bleached, causing the brain to no longer register them as forbidden or embarrassing. This process does not occur uniformly across all words; for instance, bleaching may be more pronounced in Arabic words compared to their English equivalents and *vice versa*. For example, Hala considered the word 'bitch' in Excerpt 1 and in the survey as acceptable and even humorous rather than insulting or prohibited. This shift can be attributed to the bleaching effect resulting from her continued exposure to the word on social media and in films. Conversely, she recognised the significant negativity, stigma and possible undesired consequences associated with the term. Thus, she preferred to use 'bitch', not 'عاهرة', in jest to avoid eliciting unfavourable attitudes, illustrating how attitudes influence language choice (Gobert 2015). This suggests that the semantic content

of linguistic items plays a decisive role and is interconnected with code-switching choices. It also highlights the bilingual strategy of translanguaging as a means of employing euphemism and avoiding 'bad language'.

Choosing a less intense word from different languages may also be linked with the speaker's possible selves. Hala's awareness of the undesirable consequences of using the term 'عاهرة' motivated her to avoid it, thereby steering clear of criticism and disapproval (ought-to self) (Higgins 1998). The significance of ideal and ought-to selves becomes evident when discussing appropriate contexts for taboo terms. While survey responses indicated a preference for limiting the use of taboo words to educational settings, interviewees continuously affirmed restricting their use in interactions with close friends, feeling more at ease when conversing with individuals of the same gender (Excerpts 5 and 6). In these contexts, they believe they can communicate freely without fear of judgement, thereby protecting their self-image and emphasising how attitudes influence language frequency and contextual appropriateness (Kircher and Zipp 2022). Both the ideal and ought-to selves are safeguarded, as friends and women, in general, are less likely to stereotype them as 'misbehaving', allowing them to maintain a positive self-image as polite and perhaps humorous individuals (hoped-for possible self). This confirms that attitudes towards language reflect attitudes to their speakers (Chambers and Schilling 2018).

6. Conclusion

A significant finding of this study is that bilingual females perceive and accept taboo words differently, depending on the language of communication (Arabic versus English), semantic content, social context and the desired activated selves. The study also revealed that the same lexical item can evoke different emotional responses, and bilingual speakers may hold contrasting attitudes regarding the appropriateness of a word across the two languages. This aligns with previous research (e.g. Javier and Marcos 1989; Dewaele 2004; Eilola and Havelka 2011), which posits that bilinguals' perceptions of language emotionality are not balanced. The emotional weight of the two languages is not identical, and in certain contexts, the use of a particular language may reduce anxiety levels. As Dewaele (2004) argued, language acquired after the preschool age tends to elicit less anxiety when communicating taboo words. However, this study found that emotional intensity is affected not only by language status (L1 versus L2) but also by social context. These variable emotionalities and attitudes offer insights into how Arabic-English bilinguals utilise their linguistic repertoire and make language choices. This empirical study provides evidence of how social norms shape speakers' attitudes towards linguistic forms and the dynamic process of negotiating their self-image. Values associated with the use of specific taboo words varied according to the interlocutors (friends versus strangers). The application of the possible selves theory proved useful in interpreting and understanding this relationship. While this study was exploratory and limited to a small set of taboo words and a relatively small sample of participants, future research can build on these findings to develop a more systematic review of the emotional aspects of taboo words among Arabic-

English bilinguals. These findings may also inform research in other bilingual contexts.

Funding
This project received no funding and was entirely voluntary.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Acknowledgement
The authors would like to acknowledge and thank the participants in this research.

Maram Alzubaidi (Lecturer) – Corresponding Author
English Language Department, College of Humanities and Educational Sciences, Al Leith University College, Umm Al-Qura University, Saudi Arabia
ORCID Number: 0009-0000-2639-5512
Email: Mazbeady@uqu.edu.sa

Anikó Hatoss (Associate Professor)
School of Humanities and Languages, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia
ORCID Number: 0000-0003-1143-0041
Email: a.hatoss@unsw.edu.au
Phone: +61 2 9385 8340

References

Abdullah, Soran and Mustafa Altun. (2021). 'Study of language use, language attitudes, and identities in two French speaking communities in the United Kingdom'. *International Journal of Social Sciences and Educational Studies*, 8(4): 116–126. DOI: 10.23918/ijsses.v8i4p116

Al-Khatib, Mahmoud. (1995). 'A sociolinguistic view of linguistic taboo in Jordanian Arabic'. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 16(6): 443–457.

Al-Shuwaikhat, Ahmed. (1985). Language attitudes of Saudi Arabian graduate students in the U.S.: An introduction to the study of differentials of language attitudes of intellectual elites. Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Stanford University, USA.

Baker, Colin. (1992). *Attitudes and Language.* Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.

Bond, Michael H. (2001). 'Embarrassment and code-switching into a second language'. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 126(2): 179–186.

Burns, Anne. (2009). 'Mixed methods'. In Juanita Heigham and Robert A. Croker (eds), *Qualitative Research in Applied Linguistics,* 135-161. London: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230239517_7Macmillan.

Brubaker, Brian L. (2003). Language attitudes and identity in Taiwan. Unpublished MA Thesis, University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA.

Chambers, Jack and Natalie Schilling (eds.). (2018). *The Handbook of Language Variation and Change*. New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons.

Chen, Szu-An. (2012). 'Motivation and possible selves: An interview study of Taiwanese EFL learners'. *Language Education in Asia*, 3(1): 50–59.

Dewaele, Jean-Marc. (2004). 'The emotional force of swearwords and taboo words in the speech of multilinguals'. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 25(2–3): 204–222.

Dörnyei, Zoltán. (2005). *The Psychology of the Language Learner: Individual Differences in Second Language Acquisition*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Dörnyei, Zoltán. (2010). 'Researching motivation: From integrativeness to the ideal L2 self'. *Introducing Applied Linguistics: Concepts and Skills*, 3(5): 74–83.

Eilola, Tiina M. and Jelena Havelka. (2011). 'Behavioural and physiological responses to the emotional and taboo Stroop tasks in native and non-native speakers of English'. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 15(3): 353–369. DOI: 10.1177/1367006910379263

Garrett, Peter. (2010). *Attitudes to Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Garrett, Peter, Nikolas Coupland and Angie Williams. (2003). *Investigating Language Attitudes: Social Meanings of Dialect, Ethnicity and Performance.* Wales: University of Wales Press.

Gardner, Robert C. (2004). *Attitude/Motivation Test Battery: International AMTB Research Project.* Canada: The University of Western Ontario.

Gobert, Melanie. (2015). 'Taboo topics in the ESL/EFL classroom in the Gulf region'. In Rana Raddawi (ed.), *Intercultural Communication with Arabs: Studies in Educational, Professional and Societal Contexts*, 109–126. Berlin: Springer. DOI 10.1007/978-981-287-254-8

Hamdan, Hady, Hanan Al-Madanat and Wael Hamdan. (2023). Connotations of animal metaphors in the Jordanian context. *Psycholinguistics*, 33(1): 132-166. DOI: 10.31470/2309-1797-2022-33-1-132-166

Hamman, Doug, Kevin Gosselina, Jacqueline Romanob and Rommel Bunuanc. (2010). 'Using possible-selves theory to understand the identity development of new teachers'. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 26(7): 1349–1361. DOI:10.1016/j.tate.2010.03.005

Harris, Catherine L, Ayşe Ayçíçeğí and Jean B. Gleason. (2003). 'Taboo words and reprimands elicit greater autonomic reactivity in a first language than in a second language'. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 24(4): 561–579. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0142716403000286

Henerson, Marlene E., Lynn L. Morris and Carol T. Fitz-Gibbon. (1987). *How to Measure Attitudes*. California: Sage.

Higgins, E. Tory. (1998). 'Promotion and prevention: Regulatory focus as a motivational principle'. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 30: 1–46.

Javier, Rafael A. and Luis R. Marcos. (1989). 'The role of stress on the language-independence and code-switching phenomena'. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, 18: 449–472. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01067310

Kircher, Ruth and Lena Zipp. (2022). *Research Methods in Language Attitudes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Oyserman, Daphna and Stephanie Fryberg. (2006). 'The possible selves of diverse adolescents: Content and function across gender, race, and national origin'. In Curtis Dunkel, and Jennifer Kerpelman (eds.), *Possible Selves: Theory, Research, and Application*, 17–39. New York: Nova Science Publishers.

Palvenko, Aneta. (2005). *Emotion and Multilingualism.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pavlenko, Aneta. (2008). 'Emotion and emotion-laden words in the bilingual lexicon'. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 11(2): 147–164. DOI: 10.1017/S1366728908003283

Räsänen, Sanna, Heini Maria and Julian M. Pine. (2014). 'Emotional force of languages in multilingual speakers in Finland'. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 35(3): 443–471. DOI: 10.1017/S0142716412000471

Robinson, Dawn T., Lynn Smith-Lovin and Allison K. Wisecup. (2006). 'Affect control theory'. In Peter J. Burke (ed.), *Handbook of the Sociology of Emotions*, 179–202. California: Stanford University Press.

Sutton, Tina M., Jeanette Altarriba, Jennifer L. Gianico and Dana M. Basnight-Brown. (2007). 'The automatic access of emotion: Emotional Stroop effects in Spanish–English bilingual speakers'. *Cognition and Emotion*, 21(5): 1077–1090. DOI: 10.1080/02699930601054133

Traugott, Elizabeth C. (2006). 'Semantic change: Bleaching, strengthening, narrowing, extension'. In Keith Brown (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Language and Linguistics*, 124–130. Amsterdam: Elsevier. DOI:10.1016/B0-08-044854-2/01105-6