

Raising gooseflesh: taboo, censoring and the human brain

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This talk will explore the ins and outs of words and phrases that have for a variety of reasons been subject to cultural and social proscription (Allan & Burridge in press). They include sexual and scatological obscenities, ethnic-racial slurs, insults, name-calling, profanity, blasphemy, slang, jargon, vulgarities of all kinds, even the forbidden words of non-standard grammar. Such expressions range along scales of offensiveness, potency, and wounding capacity. But they are all of them emotionally powerful in some way.

I will begin by focusing on some puzzling and remarkable aspects to the behaviour of forbidden words, particularly with respect to language development. Taboo is an emotive trigger for word addition, word loss, sound change and semantic shift. It can also affect innocent vocabulary through spurious association, even across language boundaries. When it comes to taboo words, speakers make a very real connection between the actual physical shape of these words and their meanings. This plays perpetual havoc with the methods of historical linguistics, undermining one of the very cornerstones of the discipline — the arbitrary link between the meaning and form of words.

This linguistic behaviour receives confirmation from other disciplines. Psychological, physiological and neurological studies all corroborate that forbidden words are more memorable, more evocative, more arousing and more shocking than all other language stimuli — forbidden words do raise gooseflesh. They even have a special place in our brains. So it's not surprising that attempts to stamp them out are always unsuccessful. "Bad language" is not just some nasty habit that we can be broken of, like smoking in restaurants, or nail-biting.

Reference: Allan, Keith & Kate Burridge In press. *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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taboo, euphemism, language change, bad language